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EDDIE: HIS GENIUS
AND HIS GLEE

VAN HALEN



The Dave Years, The Sammy Years, All the Inside Stories



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Sammy Hagar and Eddie Van Halen during the Monsters of Rock Tour in 1988.

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A GUITAR GENIUS

A ROCK 'N' ROLL INNOVATOR, EDDIE VAN HALEN BROUGHT AN UNFORGETTABLE COMBINATION OF JOY AND VIRTUOSITY TO HIS MUSIC. MANY HAVE TRIED TO COPY HIS SIGNATURE STYLE, NONE HAS SUCCEEDED

BY DAN SNIERSON



THE VAN HALEN FAMILY moved from the Netherlands to Southern California in 1962, when Eddie Van Halen was seven. Eddie (in his ninth grade class photo from 1970, above, and a 1978 publicity shot, right) died October 6, 2020, at age 65 after a long battle with throat cancer.

"**YOU ONLY HAVE 12 NOTES**," **EDDIE VAN** Halen said. "Do whatever you want with them." What did the man who called himself "just a punk kid who plays guitar" endeavor to do with those notes? Oh, not much. Just spin them into the most colorful hard-rock-shuffle-metal-pop-doo-wop-back-to-rock music ever blasted through a boom box, provide the soundtrack for wasted high-school parking-lot hangouts and spiraling-out-of-control backyard parties in the late '70s, '80s, and early '90s, and burnish a rep as arguably the most innovative rock guitarist of the last 50 years.

I don't buy that 12-note talk; his chromatic scale seemed to have, like, 28 notes. You see, Eddie Van Halen was just . . . *otherworldly*. If Michael Jordan defied physical gravity, Eddie defied *sonic* gravity, flurries of notes skittering every which way and hanging in the air longer than they should, squeals rocketing up to the heavens, whammy-bar dives scraping down against the gates of Hades. Was that funky-slap-into-harmonic-tap opening to "Mean Street" some sort of Martian Morse code? With Eddie gripping that fretboard, it often sounded like alien possession, prompting millions to chant, "*Whoa*. Take me to your leader."

The first time I heard "Eruption"—the 102 seconds of face-melting, flag-planting virtuosity that was Eddie's solo showcase on Van Halen's debut album in 1978—the matrix became evident and folded in on itself at once. An aspiring-but-failed guitarist, I would spend hours listening to VH albums on cassette, my fingers spending much more time on the rewind and play buttons than on the fretboard, futilely trying to figure out how he pulled off: those artificial and natural harmonics; those blistering arpeggios; those classically sauced slip 'n' slide finger-tapping fills; those frenetic runs over rock and blues shuffles; and that kick-ass whammy-bar punctuation. Sooner or later, the answers would be made clear: Best to set the guitar aside and just listen. Eddie Van Halen was an explorer, and none of his peers could keep up with him on the path that he'd







THOUGH HE SAID HE couldn't read music, Eddie (performing in 1979, left, and working in his studio in '83, above) became one of rock 'n' roll's most innovative guitarists. The fretboard was his playground, where his proficiency and speed created his band's signature sound.

bushwhacked for himself.

But he was far greater than the sum of his pyrotechnics. Eddie played with exuberance, with ease, with feel, with taste—elements that seemed to be missing from his wannabe rivals' robotic fretwork. He exuded raw, uncurbed power à la Jimi Hendrix (someone he didn't claim as an influence, surprisingly enough; he'd pledged allegiance to Eric Clapton), and there was a spontaneous, careening-to-the-finish-line thrill that he and also-electric front man David Lee Roth turbo-injected into the proceedings. ("Hot for Teacher" is your pal's bad-ass car that you borrowed for an epic joyride—and returned it with some paint scraped off and the bumper hanging sideways.) Simply put, to listen to Edward Van Halen play guitar was to listen to fun incarnate.

While those blazing solos grabbed headlines, as did his 1981 marriage to Valerie Bertinelli, Eddie wrote compelling musical stories underneath them. He was an exceptional riff-rhythm player. "Dance the Night Away," a Van Halen hit with no true guitar solo, stands as one of the tightest, brightest, pop-rock anthems of the '70s, while "Secrets" is the wistful, wanderlusty *Diver Down* deep cut still calmly waiting for the casual fan to bask in it. And hang on as Eddie lays down those feisty, sprawling foundational grooves of "Unchained" and "5150." He was two guitarists in one, often at the same time.

Let us also marvel at his songwriting chops, which, when commingled with Roth's and later Sammy Hagar's, begat decades of classic-rock radio staples. He could deliver soaring pop with "Jamie's Cryin'" and "Summer Nights," and chug through darker rock that could swing and bite, like "Romeo Delight," "Somebody Get Me a Doctor," and, yes, "Sinner's Swing!" Or he could mash aesthetics together, as in the stomping "I'm the One." A deeply intuitive musician who didn't know how to

read music, Eddie wound up winning a few childhood piano competitions as a Dutch-immigrant-turned-Pasadena kid, and he wasn't afraid to experiment with keyboards ("Jump," "I'll Wait," and "Right Now"), or with twangy country pop ("Finish What Ya Started"), or even with '20s jazz (the band's surprisingly restrained cover of "Big Bad Bill [Is Sweet William Now]," featuring Eddie and drummer Alex Van Halen's father, Jan, on clarinet).

Eddie wasn't typically described as restrained, but the shredder with a gift for hooks and melody could recognize when less was more. (Cue up the solos on "Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love," "Runnin' with the Devil," "Jamie's Cryin'," and "When It's Love.") Whether you preferred Eddie's dirty, chunky swagger during the Roth era or his polished power-balladry during the Hagar tenure, his playing was always laced with textured magic dust that provided you with a contact dopamine high.

He leaves a sizable footprint in pop culture, well beyond the 80 million-plus records sold worldwide. Who did Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson call when they needed a killer genre-crossing solo for "Beat It"? Who did Bill and Ted desperately want in their band? Whose sick six-stringery did Marty McFly use in *Back to the Future* to persuade George McFly that he was from another planet? Whose groove did Tone Lōc sample on his wild ride up the charts? Whose power chords were served up in a bizarro animation sequence in *Better Off Dead* when Lane Myer Frankensteined a burger to life? Eddie was the go-to guitarist, the poster child for the guitar-god poster.

Budding axemen and -women all over the world still post on YouTube their attempts at conquering one of his solos, while professional musicians studiously deconstruct his fretwork. He remains one of the most influential rock guitarists ever; references to Mozart have been made. Hordes of disposable hair metal bands may have clumsily copycatted in his wake, but Eddie also imprinted on future players of all kinds—Tom Morello, Billy Corgan, Dimebag Darrell, Slash, Rivers Cuomo, John Mayer, Lenny Kravitz, Vernon Reid, Keith Urban, and Mike McCready among them—so that they could think and stretch differently.

Eddie's loud licks and godhead status always seemed to be in conflict with his press-shy personality, as Eddie preferred to let his instrument do his talking. Over the years, he would battle both alcoholism and cancer, the latter seemingly leading to his most recent retreat from the spotlight. But Van Halen's last album, 2012's *A Different Kind of Truth*, and their final tour, in 2015, once again showcased a legend who could still bring it and sling it. (That late-era VH became a true family affair for Eddie, whose brother, Alex, already served as the band's thunderous drummer. In the mid-2000s, Eddie replaced the golden-throated fan favorite Michael Anthony with his talented teenage son, Wolfgang, as the band's bassist.)

Eddie's legacy is secure—as is his spot on Mt. Rockmore—but how will we remember him in the years to come, aside from all that joyful wizardry and murderer's row of stadium pleasers? I'll think of the red-and-white-striped guitar, complete with matching overalls. I'll think of the cigarette burning at the end of his headstock while he scorched through another solo, as if the smoke were venting out from an overheated fretboard. I'll think of him with his back to us, eye-chatting with Alex on drums, the two of them locking into some giddy groove that seemed like an inside joke between them. I'll think of his faces of astonishment after another lickety-split legato run or supernatural squeal, as if he were mouthing, "I know! *Right*?" I'll think of him bouncing around the stage with Diamond Dave, two competing and complementary forces creating a spectacle of circus energy. But mostly I'll think of that guy with a grin on his face and a guitar in his hands, just happy to be in his natural element, just happening to be rewriting the rules of rock, doing whatever he wanted with his 28 notes. ●



ONSTAGE AND IN THE STUDIO, Eddie was passionate about his music and how it affected fans. "I just want my guitar playing to make people feel something: happy, sad, even horny," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1980.

ALL THE WORLD'S A

STAGE

ROAD WARRIORS

Van Halen thrived on tour, especially in the early days (including this 1981 stop in Detroit). "Despite occasional flare-ups, there was, in that first year or two, anyway, a genuine sense of camaraderie among not just the band members, but the whole traveling circus," former manager Noel Monk wrote in his book *Runnin' with the Devil*. "Van Halen wasn't just a band, but an honest-to-God team."

SPLIT PERSONALITY

"Being onstage is like being in the jungle," David Lee Roth once told an interviewer. "It gets really hot, reaches about 110 degrees by the second song, and you're outta wind and you're limping and you barely make it to the next song." He demonstrated his gymnastic ability at the Rainbow Theatre in London in 1978.


Ludwig
Ludwig

FOUR'S COMPANY

Van Halen's earliest success was due in part to the laid-back chemistry of the quartet. "Everyone pretty much does what they want, and we all throw out ideas, so whatever happens happens," Eddie told *Guitar Player* in 1978. "Everything is pretty spontaneous."





STAR POWER

Though they made great music together for decades, Roth and Eddie (in 1982 with Michael Anthony) had their share of feuds. "I'm a musician, Dave's a rock star," Eddie told *Rolling Stone* in 1984, a dig at Roth's theatrical personality.


THE JETSONS

SEEING RED

Sammy Hagar (a.k.a. the Red Rocker) joined the band in 1986 and they immediately hit the road. "I felt so comfortable with the music that we were playing," Hagar (with Anthony on that tour) said in an interview with Dan Rather 30 years later. "But I was nervous on that first show, because I didn't feel that the audience was going to sit there and listen to us play a bunch of new stuff. But we came out and we opened the show and they knocked the barricade down and came rushing up."

GARDEN PARTY

The most recent lineup—Wolfgang Van Halen, David Lee Roth, Alex Van Halen, and Eddie Van Halen—took the stage at New York's Madison Square Garden in 2012. "To be playing together is something I've always dreamed of," Eddie told *Guitar World* of his son, "Wolfie," joining the band. "Believe it or not, I didn't know [he'd] be this good."

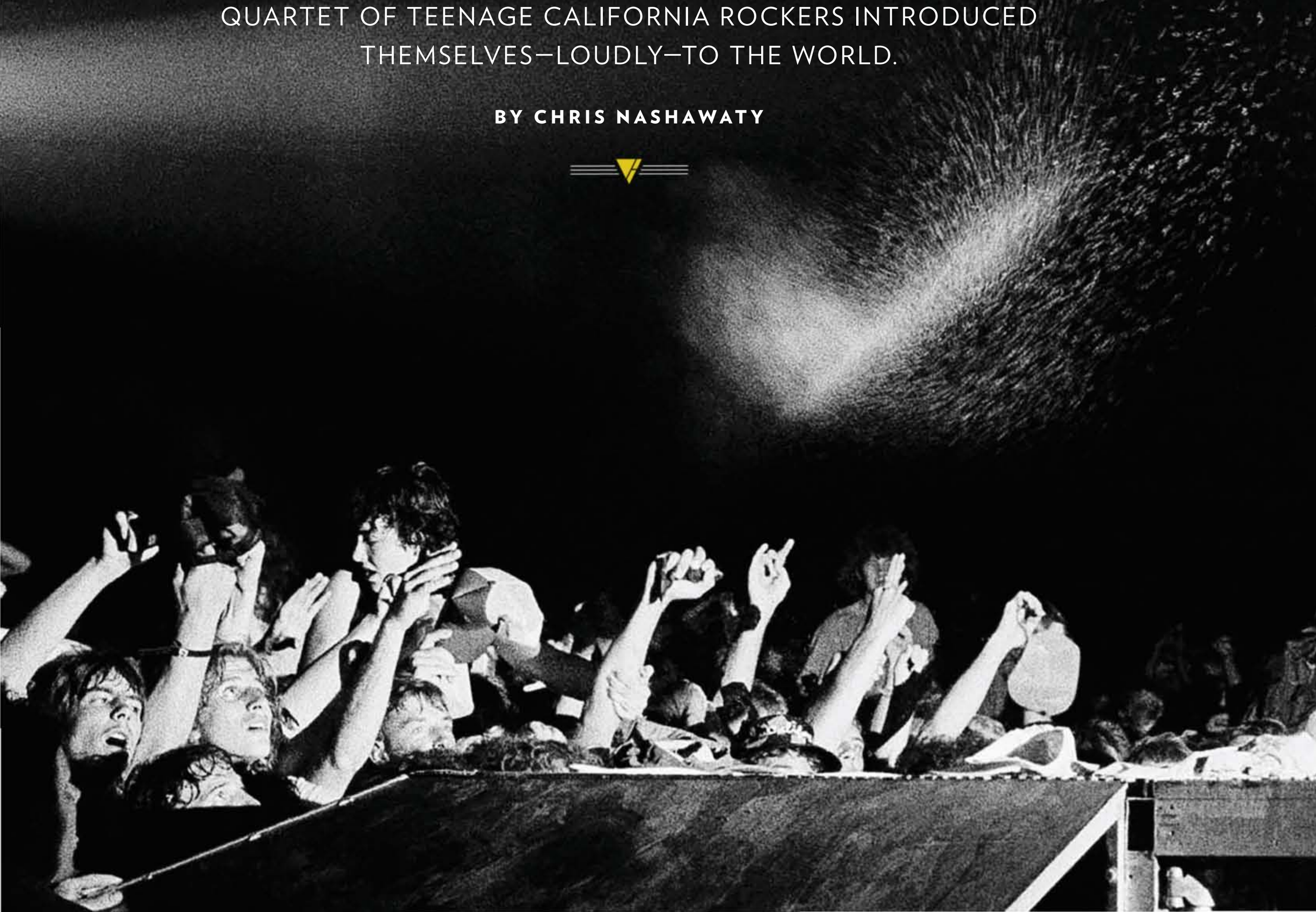


CHAPTER 1

BURSTING ONTO

AS THE 1970S WERE WINDING DOWN, A ROWDY QUARTET OF TEENAGE CALIFORNIA ROCKERS INTRODUCED THEMSELVES—LOUDLY—TO THE WORLD.

BY CHRIS NASHAWATY



THE SCENE

DAVID LEE ROTH WAS THE band's tireless, acrobatic front man (here at the US Festival in Devore, California, in 1983). "I actively imitated everything from the Nicholas Brothers tap dancing to Mick Jagger going 'Oooh yeah!'" he told the *Guardian* in 2012. "But because of whatever, it never sounds like anything to you but David Lee."

WHENEVER YOU WATCHED EDDIE Van Halen play the guitar, your eyes struggled to focus on two things at once—his blurring, quicksilver fingers and the expression of sheer joy on his face. Those fingers seemed to be extensions of the musician's brilliantly creative and ever-pinwheeling mind, whether they were mercilessly crunching out snarling power chords or effortlessly tapping away on the neck of his axe like a concert pianist racing through the scales, daring you to keep up with him. Your eyes wanted to stay there, of course, as if glued to a Fourth of July fireworks display in full incandescent bloom while you desperately tried to divine how one human being could possibly summon such dazzling and otherworldly flights of notes from a single man-made instrument. But then you'd catch yourself looking at his face. And your eyes wanted to stay there, too. Because whenever there was a guitar in his hands, he would be smiling from ear to ear like a little kid who couldn't possibly imagine anything more fun in the world. That exuberance was infectious. He seemed to be

ROTH BONDED WITH THE Van Halen brothers because they were all "desperate people seeking desperate fortune—with a smile," he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2012. Still, Roth and Eddie (backstage at the Lewisham Odeon in London in 1978) had a frequently contentious friendship.



born with the express purpose of playing rock 'n' roll. And he would play it like no one ever had before or since.

It's no exaggeration to say that Eddie Van Halen was the most original and innovative six-string superhero of his generation, creating an entirely new language on the electric guitar. And like all superheroes, whether real or created in the panels of a comic book, the path toward his rock 'n' roll destiny begins with an origin story. It goes like this: Along with his brother, Alex (who was older by two years), Edward was born in the Netherlands to a Dutch concert-musician father, Jan, who played both the clarinet and the saxophone, and an Indonesian-Dutch mother, Eugenia, who was ostracized for her mixed racial heritage. When the Van Halen boys were seven and nine, the family moved from Amsterdam to Pasadena, California, just over the hills from the bright lights of Los Angeles. There was never any doubt that Eddie and Alex would follow in their father's footsteps. And before they were both 10, they would enter—and win—numerous classical piano competitions. Music was in their blood and their marrow.

For the musically insatiable Van Halen brothers, it was obvious that mastering one instrument would never be enough. And before long, Jan scraped together enough money to buy Alex an acoustic guitar and Eddie a $125 St. George drum kit. But while Eddie was out delivering newspapers to help his family earn money, his older brother would sneak behind his drum kit, where he was soon pummeling away like an uncaged animal. "He was better at it than I was," Eddie said years later, adding that he

THE EARLY YEARS WERE A nonstop party. Alex (above on a tour bus in London in 1978) drank heavily, like his brother, especially when on the road. But in the studio, Eddie was all business (opposite, in 1978, using an old airplane bomb casing to keep his amps and electrical equipment together).


CANADA DRY
Ginger Ale





resignedly told Alex, "Okay, play my drums, I'll take your damn guitar." During the next five decades, neither would ever look back with regret on that fateful trade.

In 1964, Eddie and Alex formed their first rock band. Tirelessly dedicated but barely into their teens, they called themselves the Broken Combs. In short order, perhaps when their adolescent hormones kicked in, they cheekily rechristened themselves as the Trojan Rubber Company. In 1972, they changed their identity yet again, this time to Genesis. When they discovered that the name was already being used by Phil Collins and Peter Gabriel's British prog-rock band, they settled on Mammoth—a fitting moniker for a pair of musicians who, even early on, could create a thunderous wall of sound.

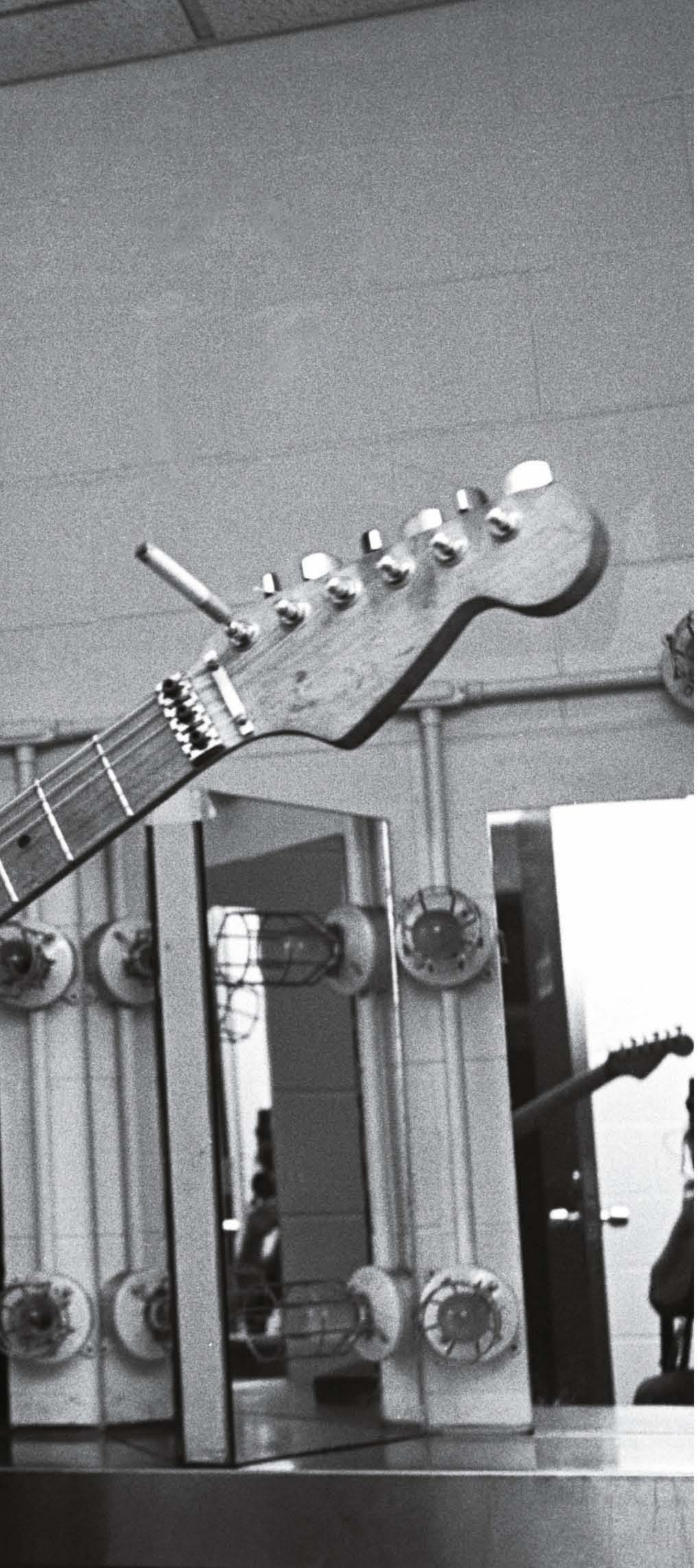
Cash-strapped, the Van Halens would rent the sort of PA system that they could ill afford for their gigs from another local musician—a wannabe singer from the ritzier side of the Pasadena tracks named David Lee Roth. Eventually, Roth—the charismatic, hyperactive son of a well-to-do ophthalmologist—would be asked to ditch his band, the Red Ball Jets, and join Mammoth as their front man. His voice was wild, raw, and untrained, but even early on he oozed golden-god stage presence and possessed boundless ambition. He had the air and patter of someone who always knew that he'd be famous one day. In other words, he was perfect. Eddie would later say that he and Alex only asked Roth to join Mammoth because they were tired of digging into their pockets to rent his equipment. Either way, two years later, they added Michael Anthony (born Michael Anthony Sobolewski), a sweet, soft-spoken, receding type who also happened to be a pile driver on the bass. The core four were on their way.

BASSIST MICHAEL ANTHONY (in 1979, opposite), "remained a gentle and fun-loving soul even as the chaos swirled around him," former band manager Noel Monk wrote in his book, *Runnin' with the Devil*. "He was an unlikely rock star, and therefore suited to playing the least flamboyant instrument in the band." Anthony brought up the rear while the band skated in Osaka, Japan, in 1979.

Only they weren't. Not at first. Mammoth hustled to book penny-ante gigs in their early days at local backyard keg parties, musty high school gymnasiums, stale beer-scented dive clubs, and even bar mitzvahs. But despite the lack of glamor of these venues, they played so often that they became as tight as a four-piece wrecking crew. Soon, they found themselves playing bigger clubs such as the Whisky a Go Go and Gazzarri's, on the other side of the hills on L.A.'s Sunset Strip. One night in 1977, Gene Simmons from Kiss was in the audience. Simmons had come to see another band called the Boyz, but he remembers being knocked back on his platform heels by the opening act. "They were making this furious noise with all of these melodies coming out of the guitar like I'd never heard before," Simmons said. "I went to the front of the balcony and looked over. You saw Roth without his shirt on, and Alex playing the crap out of the drums, and Michael pumping away. And then this guitar player doing things with his hands on the guitar I would have never imagined." Simmons was convinced that night that the four could be huge if given a chance.

Simmons brought the band to New

EDDIE TOOK HIS CRAFT VERY seriously. "I know a lot of people who really want to be famous or whatever, but they don't really practice the guitar," he told *Guitar Player* in 1978. "They think all you do is grow your hair long and look freaky and jump around, and they neglect the musical end."



York to record a demo at Electric Lady Studios, the same studio where the previous generation's guitar messiah, Jimi Hendrix, had recorded. The guys tore through more than a dozen songs, none taking more than a few takes. Simmons sent the demo to Kiss's manager, who made the mistake of tossing it in the trash. In the meantime, the band decided that they needed another image makeover and changed their name once again. This time, to Van Halen. The name was actually Roth's idea. Despite his massive ego as the face of the band, he seemed to recognize that it was Eddie's guitar that was their best shot at propelling them to fame.

With their major label dreams temporarily dashed, Van Halen went back to work, prowling the seedy stages of the Sunset Strip and whipping their growing fan base into a frenzy night after night. One evening in 1977, at a club called the Starwood, Warner Bros. Records kingmaker Mo Ostin and legendary producer Ted Templeman caught Van Halen's show. Afterward, they went backstage and signed the naïve-but-hungry foursome to a deal. The contract would later turn out to be onerous and exploitative (in other words, standard record-industry practice). But on that night, Van Halen felt as if they'd finally made the big time. Within months, Ostin had his latest discovery on the road as the third-billed act supporting Montrose and Journey. They would end up blowing both higher-profile acts off the stage every night.

During breaks from the tour, Ostin sent Van Halen into the studio at Sunset Sound Recorders with Templeman behind the controls as their producer. By that time, Templeman had already shepherded hit records for Van Morrison, the Doobie Brothers, Fleetwood Mac, and Van Halen's personal heroes, Aerosmith. Van Halen would lay down their first album in



three weeks, embracing the sort of imperfections that most bands tend to smooth over with studio trickery. It sounded like one of their incendiary live shows, which was exactly the point. Then, in January 1978, Ostin sent a five-song *Van Halen* EP to radio stations in an attempt to build buzz for his new band. To guarantee that DJs would play the record, he had it pressed on clear red vinyl.

It worked. Of course, it didn't hurt that the record featured "Runnin' with the Devil," the volcanic guitar showcase "Eruption," "Ice Cream Man," "Jamie's Crying," and the Kinks cover "You Really Got Me."

The band's first album was officially released on February 10, 1978. And four decades later, it remains one of the greatest debuts in rock history. A note-perfect Molotov cocktail of heavy-metal thunder cut with radio-friendly glam pop, *Van Halen* was the work of a raucous, louder-than-hell party band anchored by virtuoso technical proficiency. There was nothing else like it on either the radio or in the bins of record stores at the time. It would reach No. 19 on the *Billboard* album chart a month after it came out. By May, it went gold. And by October, it was certified platinum, selling more than a million copies. All told, *Van Halen* would wind up spending 169 weeks on the charts—more than *three years*.

In the meantime, the band would head back on the road for a 1978 tour that set a punishing new standard of Caligulan debauchery and decadence. And that was just backstage. On it, they were on the attack at every stop, emanating wild danger, with Roth preening like a carnal peacock in leather pants, Eddie blowing fans' minds with his pyrotechnic, dive-bombing solos, and Alex and Michael providing the backbone amid the squalling sonic chaos. Van Halen was hellbent on proving



THE WORLD VACATION TOUR in 1979 (including a stop at the Nippon Budokan in Tokyo, above) was the band's first as a headlining act, with a nearly nonstop itinerary from March to early October.



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

THE BAND'S SELF-TITLED DEBUT ALBUM WAS A MUSICAL TRIUMPH FROM START TO FINISH

BY KOSTYA KENNEDY

I wasn't aware of Van Halen's debut album when it came out in 1978, but I did become aware of it some years later at a time when the consideration of albums, and CDs, was still made with a sense of the whole. How the songs were ordered, how the experience unfolded from the opening track to the last, was one measure of the music itself. In that time it was part of a collective understanding that there had rarely, or never, been a debut album quite so audacious, cocksure, excellent, and embraceable as *Van Halen*. Who were these guys? The first three tracks went like this. (1) Here's the band: "Runnin' with The Devil." (2) Oh, and here's our guitar player: "Eruption." (3) Now here's a cover of a seminal rock song (in which, while paying all due homage, we proceed to kick the s--- out of the original): "You Really Got Me."

They never looked back.

"Runnin' with the Devil" encapsulated Van Halen's brashness and joie de vivre, all under a title so succinctly evocative the band's manager later took it as the title for his book. The song has story, hoots and hollers, the big steady bass notes, and (one more time) Eddie's joyously melodic guitar runs. "Eruption"—gorgeous, ecstatic, technically astonishing—reframed the potential of the electric guitar. The rest of the 11-song album follows suit, replete with the vocal harmonies on "Feel Your Love," Alex's tom-tom riff on "Jamie's Cryin'" (sampled by Tone Lōc on his megahit "Wild Thing" 10 years later), and a kind of, well, call it a *coupe de glace* in the playful near-finale, "Ice Cream Man." The band members couldn't wipe the smiles off their faces, and neither could we.

For rock DJs, 1978 was a fertile year: Bruce Springsteen's *Darkness at the Edge of Town* and the Rolling Stones' *Some Girls* came out within a week of each other in June. Billy Joel's *52nd Street* and the Police's *Outlandos D'Amour* landed in the fall. None of those records deliver the crucial feeling—*how lucky we are to be alive right now*—in the way that Van Halen's lid-lifter does. The feat of yea-saying harkened to the Beats of the '50s (Is "Runnin' with the Devil" a three-minute, 36-second interpretation of *On the Road*?) while also auguring the decade of celebration ahead. February 10, 1978, when *Van Halen* appeared on record-store shelves was the day, as Americans would come to find out, that the 1980s began.

night after night what they already knew to be true—that they were the greatest rock band on the planet. On the final leg of their tour in the UK, Van Halen would open for Black Sabbath, managing even to win over their doubting horde of headbanging (and almost entirely male) followers. Said Black Sabbath front man Ozzy Osbourne, "They blew us off the stage every night. It was so embarrassing. They kicked our asses." The only question for Van Halen at that point was: What could they possibly do for an encore?

As 1978 was winding down, the band returned to the studio to record their second album. It was just six days after their tour had ended. Again, they cut all of the tracks in three short weeks. Fortunately, the band already had several songs in their hip pockets, including the slick and poppy "Dance the Night Away." As for the new songs, responsibilities were split between Eddie (who wrote virtually all of the music) and Roth (who wrote the band's libidinal lyrics—often on the way to the studio). At that point, Van Halen was still an all-for-one unit, and they made a handshake deal that all royalties from the band's music would be split evenly.

Released on March 23, 1979, *Van Halen II* would receive mostly positive notices from the toughest critics. To Warner Bros.' relief, "Dance the Night Away" broadened the band's audience, becoming their first Top 20 single. *Van Halen II* went gold in a month and platinum in two, peaking at No. 6 on *Billboard*. Before they knew it, they were back barnstorming on the road, only this time as headliners. Titled the World Vacation Tour, the 100-date itinerary sent the band from North America to Europe to Asia. And by the time it was done, everything spiraling around Van Halen had gotten bigger. They were selling out arenas, helping them finally earn back the money from their record-label advance they'd spent on fast cars and new homes. The drinking and drug use by some members, the egos, and the internal squabbling were growing too.





THE UNRELENTING PACE OF touring continued in 1982 and ’83, when the band embarked on the Hide Your Sheep Tour (in support of *Diver Down*). In addition to performing in the United States and Canada, the band also toured South America for the first time.



By 1980, just three years after signing their initial deal with Warners, Van Halen found themselves on a brutal hamster-wheel cycle and there seemed to be no getting off it. Not with their label eager to capitalize on their white-hot popularity. Again, as soon as they finished their tour, they went back into the studio to cut their third album, *Women and Children First*. The only problem was, at this point, they'd burned through their back catalogue of prewritten songs and needed to conjure a complete record from scratch. The music that Eddie wrote for the album was heavier, crunchier, and sludgier than their previous LPs, while Roth's lyrics seemed a bit less party-hearty and inspired. Blame it on fatigue or whatever extracurricular vice you want to choose.

Women and Children First was released on March 26, 1980, and received a more lukewarm reception from the rock press than the band's first two records. There would be only one single from the album (the lugubrious and downbeat "And the Cradle Will Rock"), but Van Halen's hard-won reputation proved enough to goose sales, making it go triple-platinum by the time all was said and done.

Without taking a break, the band launched into the World Invasion Tour, during which Eddie would meet a celebrity who had noticed his photo on the back of her younger brother's copy of *Women and Children First* and decided that she needed to meet the man in the flesh.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 41

ROTH USED PROFESSIONAL wrestlers and comic book superheroes as his inspiration for his outrageous concert outfits. "Pushing boundaries in terms of what [Van Halen] wore was never an ambition of ours, but it always seemed to be where we would end up," he told the *Guardian* in 2019.




VAN HALEN
W.D.
F.A.
1981

EDDIE (HERE IN 1982) WAS respected *and* well liked by his fellow musicians. "I think of him as a boy—an innocent prodigy—always full of joy, always modest," Queen guitarist Brian May wrote on Instagram after Eddie's passing. "And those truly magical fingers opened a door to a new kind of playing."



INSTRUMENTS OF MAGIC

LIKE A MAD SCIENTIST, EDDIE SPENT HOURS TINKERING WITH PERFECT SOUND

BY JED GOTTLIEB

Eddie Van Halen's first and arguably finest creation came early with the Frankenstrat. In the mid-1970s, Eddie was on the hunt for a guitar that combined a Fender's vibrato with a humbucker pickup (a device that helps cancel extraneous noise). Since nobody was making anything like that, he built the instrument himself.

To construct an instrument that combined the best bits of Fenders and Gibsons, he pulled the pickup out of a 1958 Gibson ES-335 and stuck it in a Strat-style body. He finished the Frankenstrat with factory leftovers, a hand-cut pickguard, duct tape, paraffin wax, and his trademark stripped paint job. It looked like a mess but, in Eddie's hands, it positively sang. The sound of the earth opening up to roar, scream, and spit fire on "Eruption"—that's the Frankenstrat.

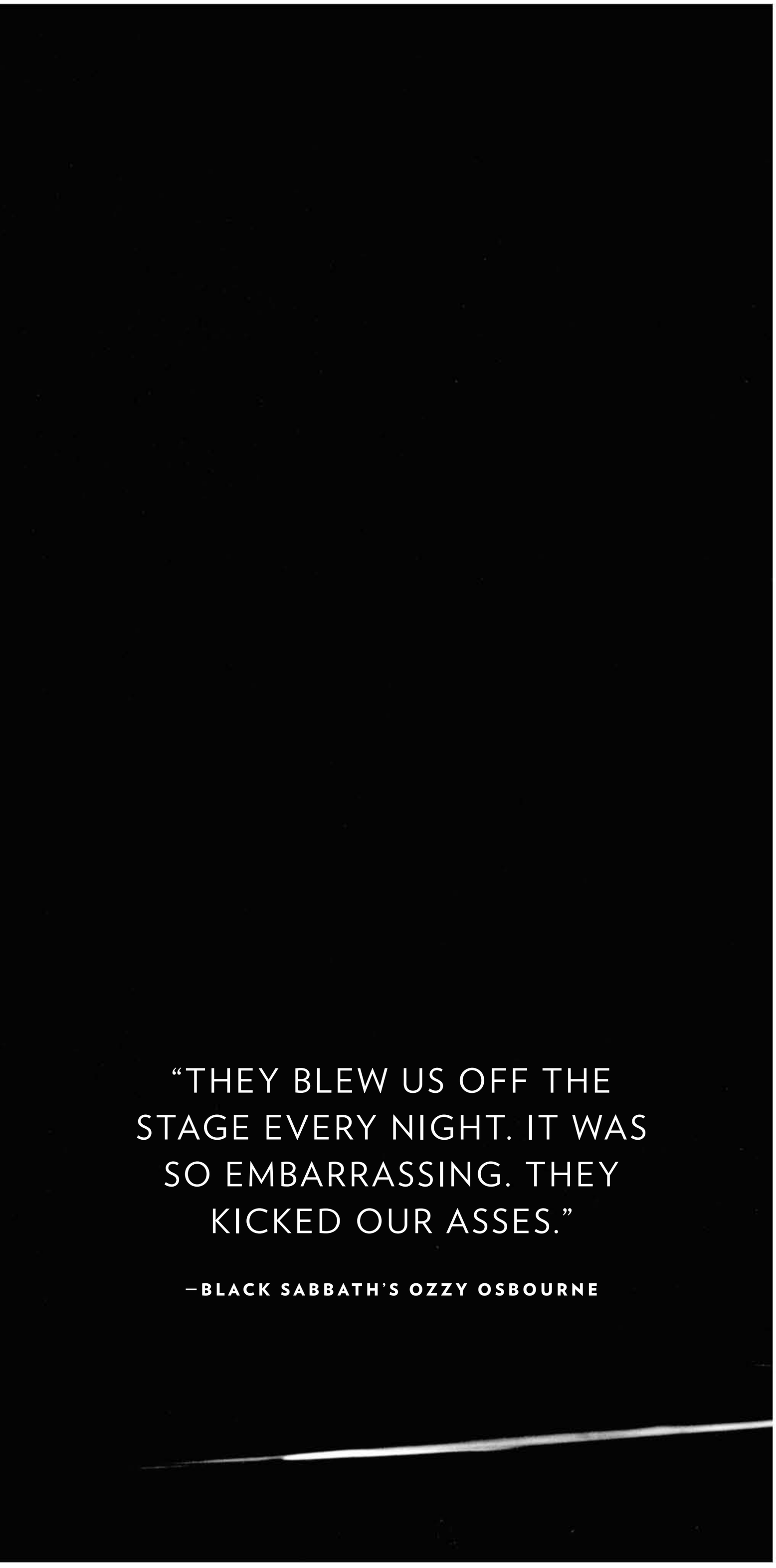
Despite the power of his first creation, Van Halen kept innovating. The Shark, a rebuilt 1970s Ibanez Destroyer, gave the world the metallic crunch of "Runnin' with the Devil." Named for its yellow-and-black stripes, the Bumblebee, made up of a hodgepodge of parts from different brands, featured prominently on *Van Halen II.* With each new guitar he created, companies looked to copy his work. Eventually, one was smart enough to partner with him.

In the early '80s, Kramer became the first manufacturer to roll out Eddie-endorsed guitars. But the icon didn't just let the company slap his name on the Kramer 5150. Employees reported he spent hours at the factory test driving (and occasionally helping assemble) the guitars. Always chasing the ideal tone, Van Halen jumped to Ernie Ball for his signature Music Man EVH model, then to Peavey for the EVH Wolfgang, and finally to Fender for a new edition of the EVH Wolfgang.

Over his career, Eddie dreamed up and customized a score of guitars. But nothing resonates like the Frankenstrat. The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has a Fender 2006 replica on display and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibited the priceless original in 2019 (above), saying the "guitar embodies not only his groundbreaking and unorthodox playing style but also his ingenuity in design and engineering."



EDDIE OFTEN NOTED THAT he wasn't a fan of the attention that came with success. "If I weren't playing this arena, if I were playing a club, I'd still be doing it because that's what I want to do," he told *Guitar World* in 1981. "I love playing the guitar."



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36

Valerie Bertinelli had been a TV star since the age of 15, thanks to her role as good girl Barbara Cooper on the hit CBS sitcom *One Day at a Time*. With her cherubic, dimpled smile and air of comic innocence, she had become America’s Sweetheart. While visiting her parents at their home in Louisiana, the then 20-year-old actress went to see Van Halen play in nearby Shreveport. At the time, Eddie Van Halen seemed an unlikely love match for Bertinelli. After all, he was a hard-partying, hedonistic, globe-trotting guitar god who never seemed to be in a relationship that lasted longer than a night. But when the two met backstage, the spark was instant. They would be married eight months later on April 11, 1981.

Uneasily juggling the dueling roles of dutiful, monogamous fiancé and most famous guitarist in the world, Eddie returned to the studio to record the band’s fourth LP, *Fair Warning*. Released on April 29, 1981, the album would turn out to be the band’s first commercial disappointment (despite the presence of their ominous and instant chugging-locomotive classic “Unchained”).

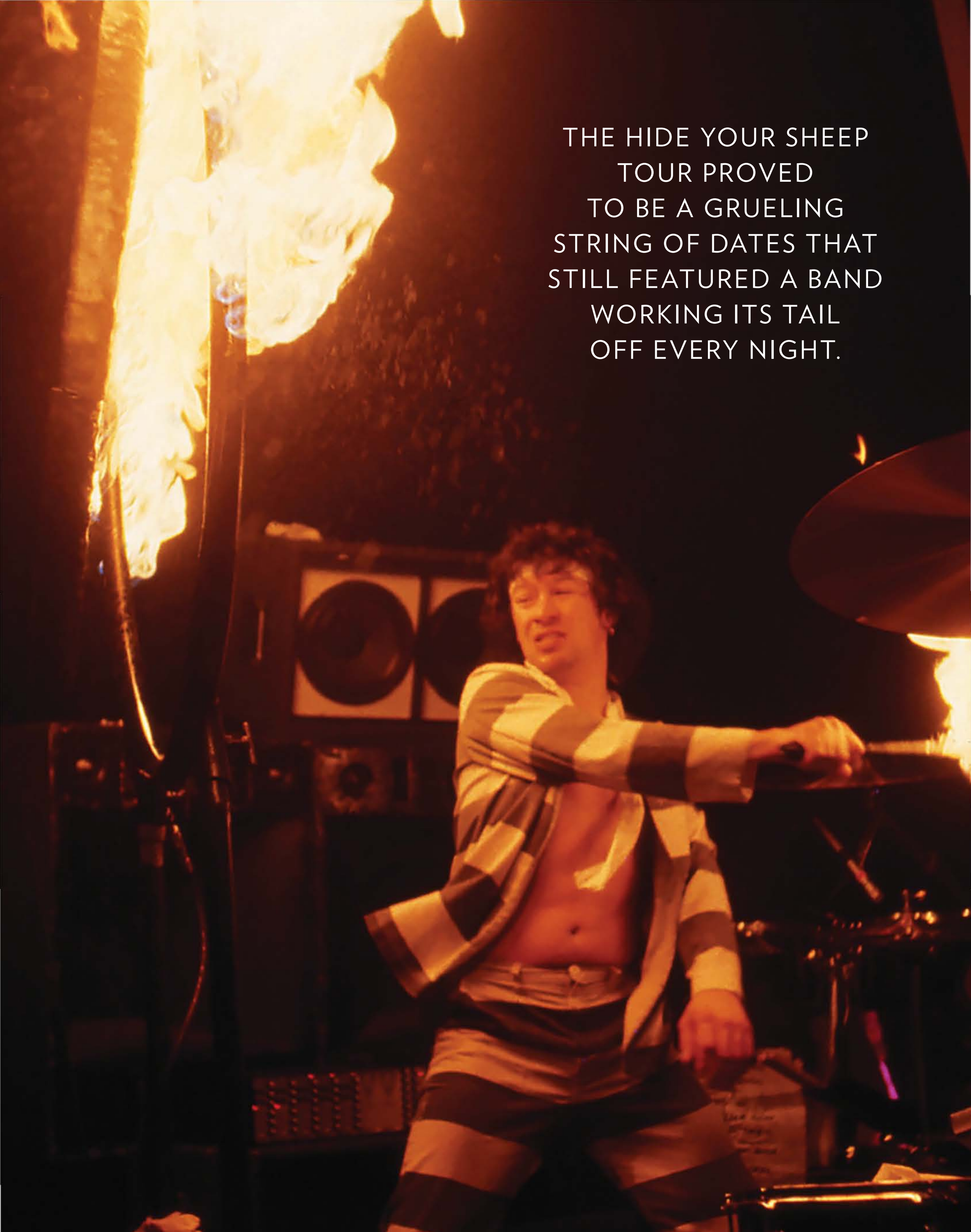
According to Van Halen manager Noel E. Monk in his 2017 backstage memoir, *Runnin’ with the Devil*, the band members were so crestfallen by the album’s slow sales they wound up digging into their own savings accounts to ‘entice’ radio stations to keep playing *Women and Children First* in order to push it over the platinum hurdle. When the tour was over, the band was completely spent, physically and emotionally. The drinking and drugging by some of the guys had become too insane and the members were getting on one another’s already-frayed nerves. Together, Van Halen agreed that they needed a long break to recharge and reenergize before going back into the studio. Of course, saying and doing are two different things.



David Lee Roth had always been the band's antsiest and most restless member, as well as its resident clown prince. Mostly, this was a good thing. His sheer will-to-power ambition had been the primary engine that drove the band to new heights of productivity and popularity. But he wasn't the kind of person who could stay still while Eddie noodled around with new ideas in his living room. Everyone in the band knew that Diamond Dave wouldn't be able to sit back for an entire year without the klieg lights trained on his now-famous face. The band's planned hiatus didn't take. Roth was itching to record a stop-gap single that would whet the appetites of fans while they worked on their next big opus. That single would end up being a cover of Roy Orbison's 1964 classic "(Oh) Pretty Woman." The cover was a bit of a lark, and it was recorded in one day. But as soon as the Warners brass saw how quickly the band's new novelty song was rising up the charts (eventually reaching No. 12), they urged Van Halen to go back into the studio to record what would end up becoming *Diver Down*.

Slapped together in less than two weeks, *Diver Down* was released on April 14, 1982, and sounded every bit as rushed as it actually was. Clocking in at a svelte 31 minutes, the record managed to feel like Van Halen through and through, albeit in a more anemic form. It was undeniably catchy and fun, but the critics refused to give it

NOT EVERYONE WAS WILD about Roth's ostentatious outfits, especially these revealing chaps (on tour in 1982, above). "I have to stand behind him while he's looking that way," Michael Anthony told *Billboard* in 2014. "Some nights you want to just laugh, and other nights you want to go, 'Oh, I don't want to stand near this.'" Alex (in '82, opposite) enjoyed a different kind of theatrics.



THE HIDE YOUR SHEEP
TOUR PROVED
TO BE A GRUELING
STRING OF DATES THAT
STILL FEATURED A BAND
WORKING ITS TAIL
OFF EVERY NIGHT.



a pass. *Rolling Stone* warned readers that the record qualified as "consumer fraud" and lamented that the band was "running out of ideas." Still, it ended up going quadruple platinum. Not bad for phoning it in.

The tour that would accompany *Diver Down* would prove to be a grueling string of dates that still featured a band that was working its tail off every night, leaving everything on the sweat-covered stage and leaving stadiums full of fans hungry for more. Acting like a cross between Bruce Lee and one of the Flying Wallendas, Roth would jump from Alex's drum riser doing high kicks and mid-air splits. But all of the hard partying was beginning to take its toll, resulting in screaming matches and petty grudges. It would also become the tour when Van Halen became infamous for its contractual rider which demanded that a bowl of M&Ms be supplied backstage at every show with one small codicil: All of the brown ones had to be removed. The band claimed it was actually conceived in order to guarantee that promoters were paying attention to the tiniest of details. But others saw the stunt as a pompous display of rock-star egotism run ridiculously amok. When the Hide Your Sheep Tour was finally over in February 1983, the band once again vowed that their next record would be more focused and less slapdash and rushed. It would be something *special*. This time they were right.

During Van Halen's magical run between the dusk of the late '70s and the dawn of the early '80s, Eddie had become the focal point of the band, at least musically. By then he'd long since graduated from being just another aspiring guitar virtuoso



DESPITE HIS ROCK GOD STATUS and trendsetting styles, Eddie (onstage with the band at the 1978 Day on the Green concert in Oakland) did not think of himself as cool. "I am much geekier than those kids dreaming about being me," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1984.



THE PERFECT MIX

A NEW SOUND AND THE OLD VALUES CONSPIRED TO DELIVER A MASTERPIECE

BY KOSTYA KENNEDY

There were any number of reactions to the first two singles released off of *1984*, and among those reactions was this: "What the f---? This is Van Halen?" Synthesizer everywhere, electronic bass drum—this was not your big brother's VH. Or was it? The irrepressibly uplifting "Jump" became, and remains, the band's most popular song of all time, driven by Eddie's triumphant chord pattern on the keys. (Sales of synthesizers spiked in the aftermath.) "I'll Wait," with the pleasant, layered vocals and the new drum sound from Alex, settled in as a solid earworm. And when the album's full track list was unpacked, the band's happy, randy soul was not only intact but thriving. The nine songs included some gorgeous stompers: "Panama," "Hot for Teacher," the hard-shuffling "Top Jimmy," and the biting, semi-sweet riff in "Drop Dead Legs" that Eddie said was inspired by AC/DC. *1984* went to No. 2 on the *Billboard* charts and wound up as Van Halen's best-selling album since the debut.

The year itself had a ring to it, of course, echoing off of George Orwell's extraordinary dystopian novel published 35 years before. Van Halen's rendering was not nearly so ominous. The year 1984 had arrived! It was to be celebrated and embraced—right here, right now. This was the peak of MTV's video influence and Van Halen found its form with a spliced, concert-footage rendition of "Jump" and with a naughty-but-chaste and absolutely rollicking unspooling of "Hot for Teacher." Dave drove the school bus, mini-me band members ruled the lunchroom, and Eddie unleashed a guitar solo in the library. The clothes, the colors, the hair, the laughter! You'd have sworn the guys winked at you during those videos, but only because they were winking at you all along. The official album title, *MCMLXXXIV,* was its own kind of spoof.

With smart phones decades away from stealing teenagers' attention, and before much on-demand anything, hours could be spent in front of MTV, hoping to hear and see the songs you loved. "Teacher" could provide the happiest five and half minutes of a day. By and large the adult versions of the '80s-era teenagers who surrendered so much potential homework time to the veejays, now look back without regret. If they had stopped watching MTV, just think of all the education they'd have missed.



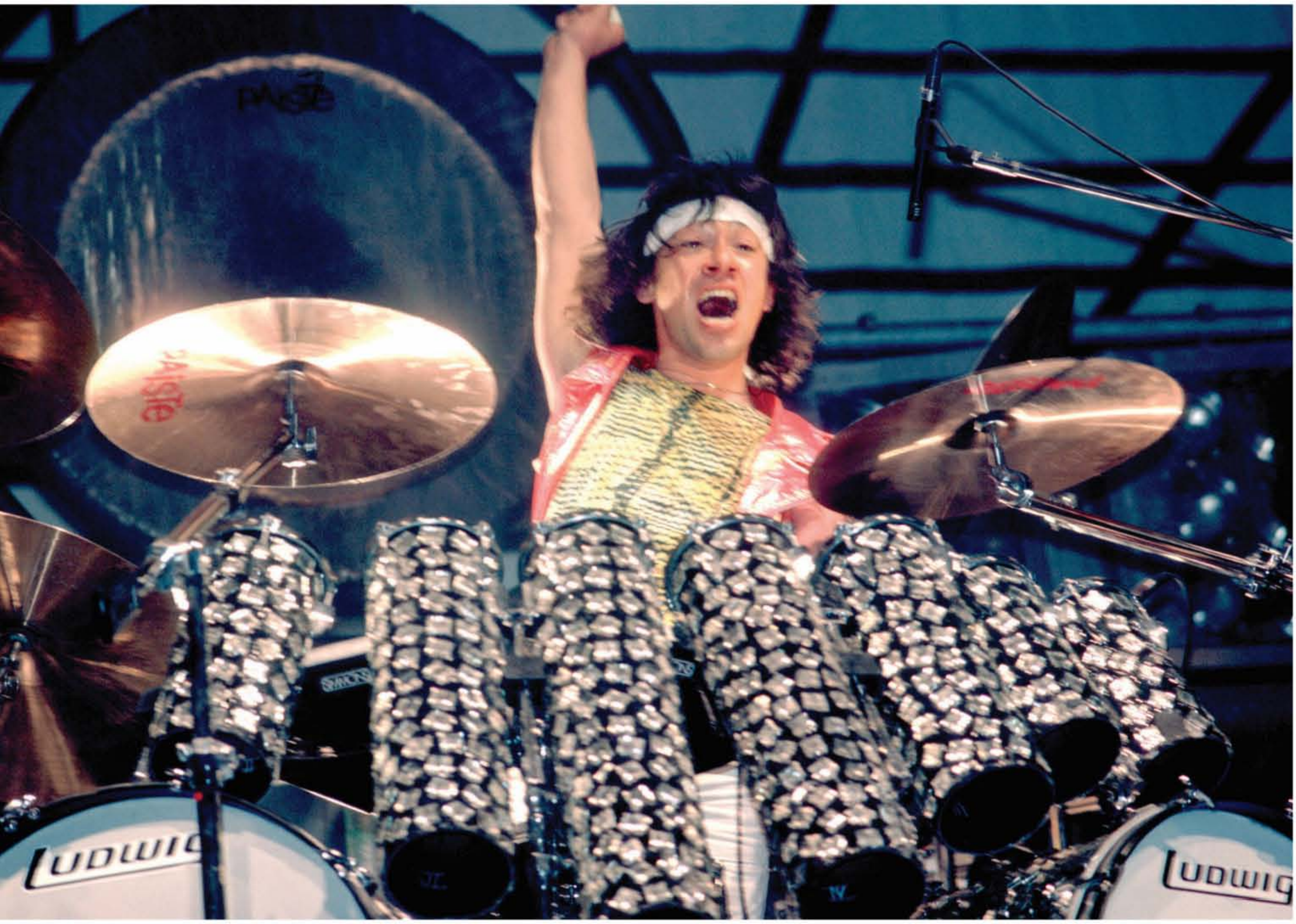
to the one true heir to Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, and Eric Clapton. He was now the most influential guitarist of his generation—the next evolutionary leap in the fretboard arms race. When he was asked by MTV if he knew just how good he was, he grinned slyly and nodded, saying, "Sometimes I freak myself out and go 'Whoa, that was kind of magical.'" Humble? No. But he wasn't wrong either.

Around the same time, Eddie would receive a phone call from Quincy Jones, who was in the studio working with Michael Jackson on the decade-defining blockbuster *Thriller*. The producer asked if he would contribute a guitar solo to Jackson's "Beat It." Eddie immediately said yes. He also refused to accept a penny for the cameo. That solo, which has the driving, face-melting electricity of a third rail, was recorded in less than an hour and helped to turn "Beat It" into a chart-topping megahit. And while he could have made millions from his contribution had he been so inclined, Eddie said that he was too flattered by the invitation to let greed get in the way. His name doesn't appear anywhere in the album's credits.

Now happily married, Eddie had just finished construction on a home recording studio that he called 5150 after the California legal code for the involuntary commitment of psychiatric patients who present a danger to themselves. For the most part, his new bespoke sonic laboratory was a sensible idea, allowing the composer in him to toy with whatever ideas popped into his head whenever the flash of inspiration struck. But it also meant that more and more he was positioning himself, unwittingly or not, to have greater control over the band. Now, whenever the band stepped into the studio, they were literally walking onto his turf. The biggest difference to come from the endless monastic hours Eddie spent in 5150 was his renewed fascination with the first instrument he had ever learned, the piano—or more specifically, electric keyboards and synthesizers. That slicker, more '80s sound would inform the band's next album, *1984*.



LESS THAN EIGHT MONTHS after they met, Eddie and Valerie (backstage in 1983, opposite, and '84, this page) were married, in April 1981. "He's not the typical rock star," Bertinelli told *People* later that year. "It shocked me that he was so normal."



The *1984* sessions were plagued by bickering, butting heads, and a smorgasbord of illicit substances, not to mention weeks of nonstop labor conducted on a vampire's hours. They also, somewhat miraculously, led to some of the best music that Van Halen had laid down since their debut record. Released on January 9, 1984, the album immediately quieted fans and critics who had grown weary of the longest creative hibernation in the band's history. The keyboard riff that opened "Jump," the band's first-ever No. 1 single (it stayed there for five weeks), would set the tone for the rest of the album, which was packed with hits ("Panama," "Hot for Teacher," "I'll Wait") that soared up the Top 40 charts thanks in no small part to Roth's bawdy penchant for outrageous, sexually charged videos that landed in heavy rotation on MTV. You would never know from listening to *1984* that the four personalities in the band—once brothers-in-arms taking on all comers—could barely stand to be in the same room together anymore.

1984 would go on to achieve diamond status, selling more than 10 million copies. But Van Halen was coming apart at the seams by the time they hit the road for what would, in the end, essentially become a nine-month farewell tour—at least for this incarnation of the band. According to Monk, Roth and the Van Halen brothers turned on Anthony, drawing up a contract to terminate his share of the band's record royalties. Always the peacemaker, Anthony signed it and soldiered on. But the days of one for all and all for one were over. Still, the final blow seemed to come as the band boarded the Concorde to fly to Europe for their headlining spot on the Monsters of Rock Tour. Unbeknownst to the rest of the band,

FOR THE *1984* TOUR (ABOVE and opposite), which would be Roth's final with this version of the band, little expense was spared. "If you asked us, we'd have said that we were burning money to put on an unforgettable experience for fans," former manager Noel Monk wrote. "But in hindsight it was almost like we subconsciously knew it would be a farewell tour, and we wanted to go out in a blaze of glory."



Roth had cut a lounge-lizardy cover of the Beach Boys' "California Girls," intending for it to be the first single on a solo record that he'd been working on in secret. When he played a tape of the song for Eddie on the plane, the guitarist seemed blindsided. It would be the final straw.

When Van Halen played their final Monsters of Rock show in Nuremberg, Germany, on September 2, 1984, the writing wasn't just on the wall, it was scrawled in permanent ink. It would be the last time that the four original members would share the stage for more than a decade. The fact that they closed their final set with a cover of Dale Evans and Roy Rogers's "Happy Trails" would soon feel both portentous and perfectly fitting. By the time Roth's self-parodying solo EP *Crazy From the Heat* finally dropped on January 28, 1985, the singer's sights had moved on to a movie deal. Roth reportedly tried to soothe Eddie's bruised feelings by asking him to compose the film's soundtrack. Which, of course, just made him fume even more.

In August 1985, Eddie Van Halen confirmed what many had long suspected. Van Halen—or at least Van Halen with David Lee Roth—was officially over. The four Pasadena teenagers who had once been as tight as brothers, who had struggled together and played bar mitzvahs and backyard keg parties together, who had toured the farthest corners of the world and reinvigorated rock 'n' roll together, who had made an indelible stamp on pop culture, earning millions of dollars in the process and leaving countless fans slack-jawed with ringing ears, was no more. It had been an amazing run. More than they, or we, could have ever dreamed of. Just as every superhero tale begins with an origin story, so too must it eventually come to an end. But this would not be the end. Not exactly. When it seemed as if Van Halen's story was over, another Van Halen story was about to begin. ●





***LIFE* MAGAZINE CAUGHT UP with the band on tour in Detroit in 1982 and saw firsthand the wild partying that went on behind the scenes, often resulting in trashed hotel rooms. "People always ask me if we behave this way at home," Roth said. "I tell them this *is* our home."**

CHAPTER 2

A NEW VOICE

WITH THE DRAMATIC ARRIVAL OF SAMMY HAGAR, THE BAND SUCCESSFULLY REINVENTED ITSELF, HERALDING IN A DECADE OF SOARING POPULARITY

BY STEVE DOUGHERTY

ONSTAGE, HAGAR AND EDDIE (here performing at the Cow Palace in San Francisco in 1986) "met in the middle and jogged in place happily," wrote Ian Christe in his book *Everybody Wants Some: The Van Halen Saga*. "Their chemistry was obvious and more wholesome than the volatile energy Roth packed with the band."





EDDIE VAN HALEN WAS BEREFT. "I cried," the guitar god said of what appeared to be a career-ending divorce. "Then I called my brother," he recounted to *Rolling Stone,* "and told him the motherf---er quit."

After 12 years together, battling their way to hard rock's pinnacle, Eddie's creative partner, the yang to his krrang, his Mick, his Plant, his lyricist, lead singer, and irreplaceable front man, David Lee Roth, had walked out on him in the spring of 1985. "We were all pretty devastated," bassist Michael Anthony later wrote. "It looked like the band had possibly come to the end. [The record company] didn't even want us to continue to call the band Van Halen."

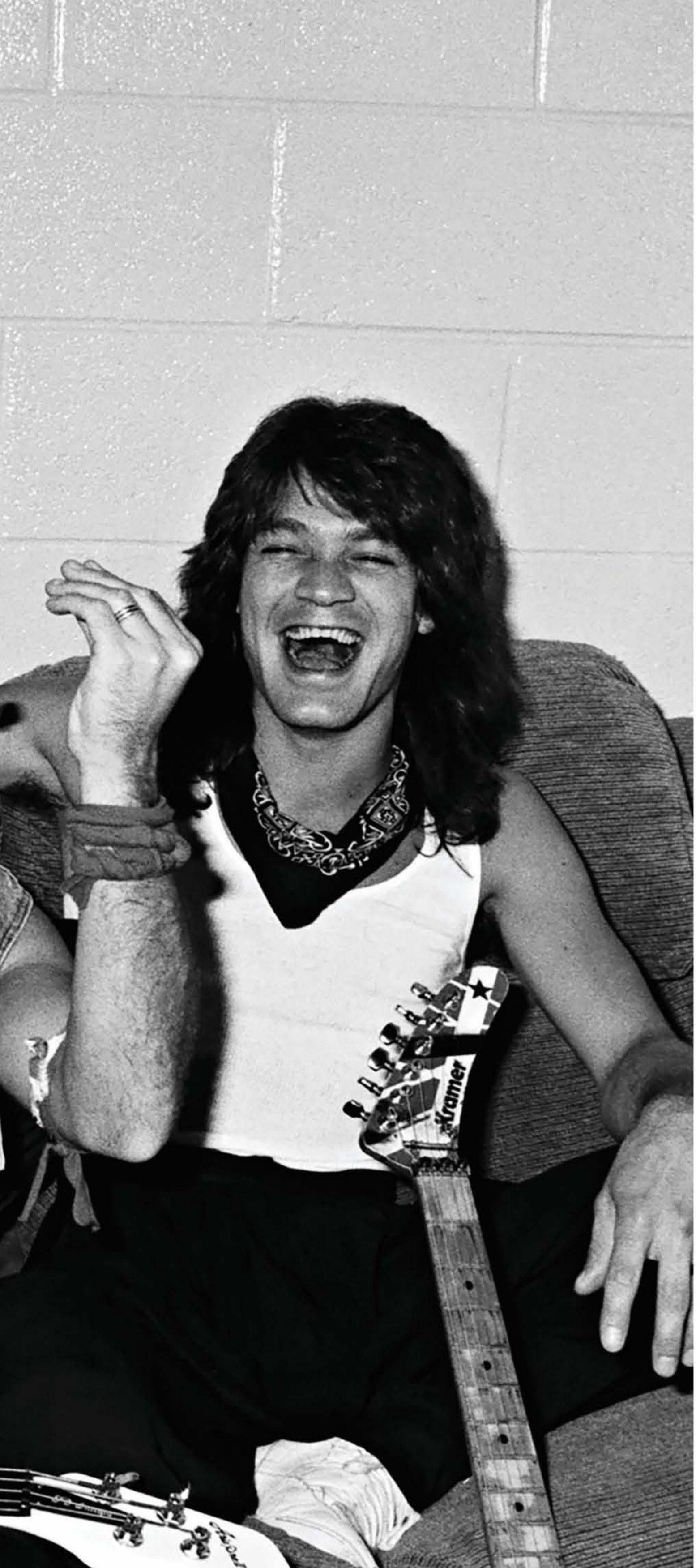
But Eddie was not about to give up the band name that was his and his brother Alex's birthright. The mad studio scientist and tinkerer who had cobbled together spare parts to invent the hybrid axe that conquered the world, the formidable Frankenstrat guitar, set out to achieve something outside the natural laws of rock 'n' roll. Within a year of Roth's departure, Eddie had engineered what *Rolling Stone* would declare "one of the very few commercially successful lead-singer transplants in recent rock history."

He had created FrankenHalen, the behemoth that would dominate the hard rock world for most of the following decade. The singer, lyricist, and front man Eddie chose to graft onto the superpowered and only



AFTER QUITTING THE BAND Montrose, Hagar (in 1977, opposite) had a successful solo career that included the hit songs "Your Love Is Driving Me Crazy" and "I Can't Drive 55." He and Eddie (here performing at the MetroCentre in Rockford, Illinois, in 1986) immediately hit it off.

HAGAR WAS INITIALLY reluctant to join Van Halen, but he connected with his new bandmates quickly. "I didn't want to join a bunch of jerks," he told *People* in 1986. "But the image of them as cold-blooded party boys must've been contrived by Roth. They're great guys. And they really kick some ass as musicians."



briefly headless Van Halen was the then 37-year-old journeyman hard rocker Sammy Hagar.

The former Montrose lead singer might have lacked Roth's lyrical wit and broad, simultaneously self-deprecating and self-inflating sense of humor. Sammy, bless him, was of the devil's horn and stuck-out tongue school of Bro' Metal; irony was not in his heavy metallurgical tool kit. But with Hagar in the forefront and Eddie working the controls in the studio and onstage, the reborn Van Halen scored four No. 1 studio albums (plus a No. 5 live album), racked up more than $27 million in record sales, and launched a series of monster tours that ran amok across America and much of the world for the next 10 years.

The revelation that would lead to his band's rebirth struck Eddie a few months after Roth walked, when he steered his Lamborghini into the San Fernando Valley auto garage where he had his luxe ride serviced. There he spied a sleek Ferrari that might have been familiar to millions of MTV fans. It had starred along with its owner, the singer, guitarist, and speed limit protestor Sammy Hagar, in his hit solo video "I Can't Drive 55." The congenial Hagar was then enjoying success as a solo artist and businessman. He had seven Ferraris to his name to prove it.

"All of a sudden it just popped in my head," Eddie later told *Rolling Stone*. "I went, 'Hey, why not call Sammy?'" Himself a Hagar fan (according to Anthony, the band had told their producer they wanted their first album to sound like Montrose), Eddie made the call before he even got back in his Lamborghini.

And he had barely said hello when he popped the question. "Would you like to get together, come down and jam, and maybe join Van Halen?" That's how Hagar recounts the conversation in his 2011 autobiography *Red: My Uncensored Life in Rock*. Having just come off the



road from a grueling tour and nursing a foot injury, Hagar was noncommittal. But once he hung up, it occurred to him that since Van Halen had apparently broken up, maybe he could get Eddie to join *his* band. "I could use a gunslinger like him," he wrote.

A few days later Hagar, then living in the Bay Area, where he grew up, drove down to L.A. and 5150—the studio Eddie had built behind the home he shared with his wife, Valerie Bertinelli, in Studio City.

In the ensuing session, the remaining three Van Halenites got down to it, rehearsing jams they had worked up the night before. When they started one riff, Hagar improvised the words "Summer nights and my radio." He started scat singing and by the time they were through, they had the beginnings of two new songs, "Summer Nights" and "Good Enough," later to be tracks on the new Van Halen's first album.

"Eddie couldn't believe it," Hagar recalled. "I was singing Eddie's guitar licks with him. After five hours they were freaking out. 'We've got a band,' they kept saying." Again, Hagar demurred.

But the next day, after listening to tapes of the session at home, he called his manager and said "I want in."

THE *5150* TOUR STRETCHED from late March to early November 1986 (including a stop in Memphis, above). It paid off, with the album hitting triple platinum (three million units sold) before the tour ended, and it ultimately doubled that figure.





To hear Sammy tell it—or write it, as he did in *Red*—he was made of very different parts than the Van Halen brothers. Where Eddie and Alex chain-smoked and drank endless cans of beer and downed shots of vodka, Hagar preferred fine wine and choked on cigarette smoke. Eddie dressed in wrinkled pants and shirts he pulled from suitcases that he never unpacked after nearly seven straight years spent on the road and in the studio. Hagar, who showed up at 5150 wearing an Armani jacket and slacks, wrote that his socks were always ironed. Married and the father of two, he enjoyed fine dining at top restaurants. Eddie, he noted, existed on hot dogs and frozen burritos heated up in the studio microwave.

But the music they cooked up that day was, Hagar wrote, "majestic."

Warner Bros. head Mo Ostin, however, was a skeptic. Fearing the band had lost its luster when Diamond Dave split, he had been among those who agreed that Van Halen, or any band by that name, was kaput. But when Ostin came over to hear the new lineup perform a new song, "Why Can't This Be Love," from what would be the next Van Halen album, he was sold. "I smell money," Ostin said.

By September 1985, when Eddie and Sammy announced their new partnership with an incendiary performance at, of all places, the first Farm Aid benefit concert in Champagne, Illinois (where Eddie, back in the saddle, beaming



"JUMP," FROM THE DAVID LEE Roth era, was the band's only No. 1 single. But during Hagar's tenure, several other records gained traction on the charts, including "Why Can't This Be Love" (peaking at No. 3 in 1986) and "When It's Love" (No. 5 in 1988).



THAT STUDIO SOUND

THE FIRST ALBUM WITH SAMMY HAGAR PROVED THAT THERE WAS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO ROCK

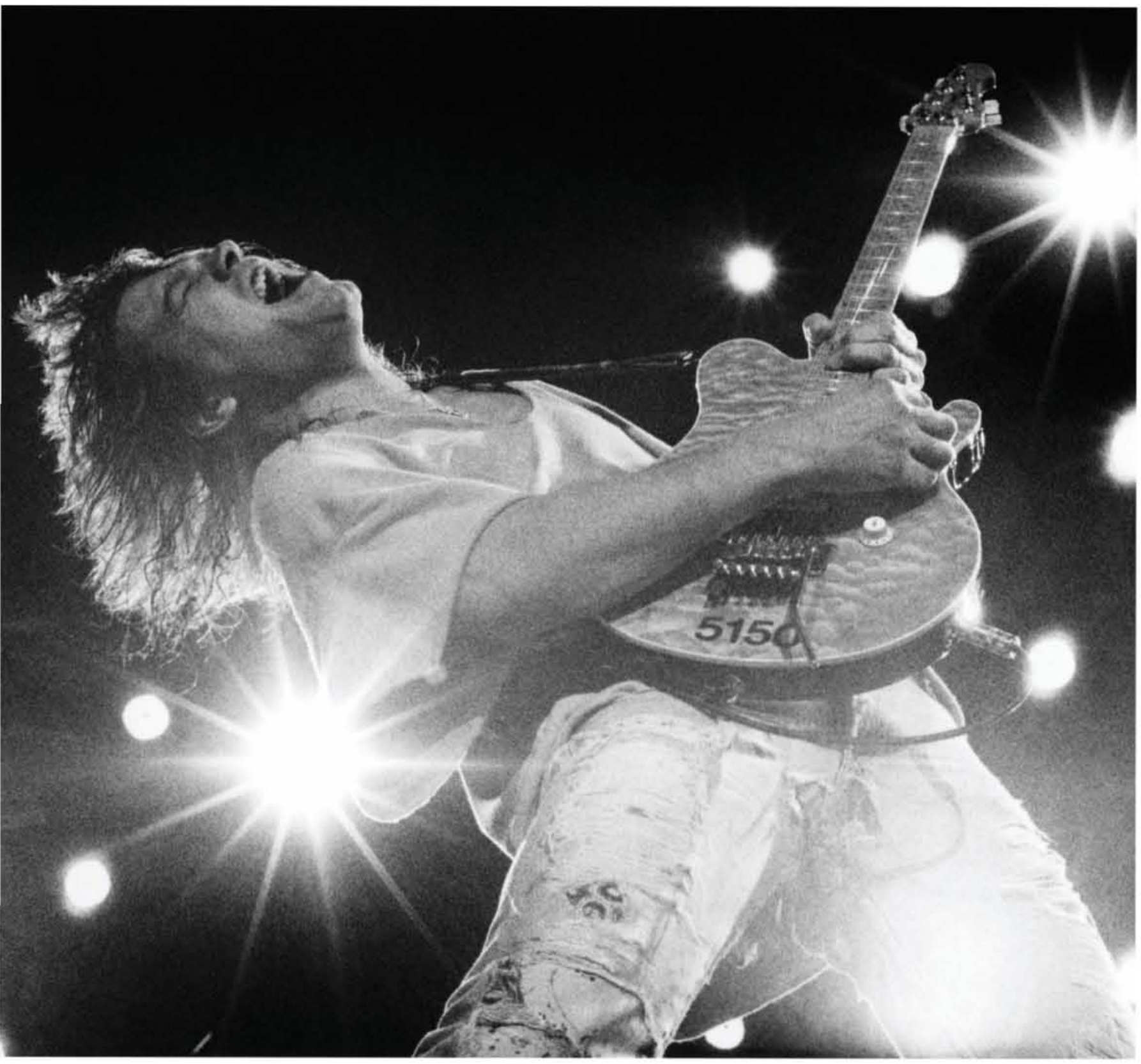
BY KOSTYA KENNEDY

There was never more anticipation (or trepidation) for a Van Halen album than for *5150.* On the heels of the exhilarating *1984,* David Lee Roth—Diamond Dave, Captain Dave, *C'mon Dave gimme a break,* can't-crow-before-I'm-out-of-the-woods Dave—yes, David Lee Roth, had quit the band. And in his place strode the chosen (by Eddie) interloper Sammy Hagar, with a history of hits that ranged from the unbearable "I Can't Drive 55" to the more plausible and far more engaging "I'll Fall in Love Again." For all of his solo success, Hagar, in Van Halen, remained a covered dish. What would the songs sound like? What would this be?

5150 arrived more than two years after *1984,* an eon in Van Halen album terms, and it went platinum in a week. Lifted by a string of crowd-pleasers—"Why Can't This Be Love," "Dreams," "Love Walks In"—the record soared to No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts and held for nearly a month. The musicianship was exceptional, of course, and the melodies were sweet and inhabiting, having been conceived in Eddie's mind and touched by his gilded hands. Yet there was a sameness to the elements. The drums, bass, guitar, keyboards, and voice all seemed made of the same gleaming stuff. As if the entire album had been dipped in silver polish. Gone was the natural feeling, the scruffy immediacy that made you feel as if the band had plugged their Marshalls into the wall sockets and were jamming in your living room. This felt more proficient, cleaner, set apart.

Along with the hits, the album yielded a real kegger in "Summer Nights" as well as the best song that Van Halen–with-Hagar would ever produce. The title track, "5150," included a gorgeous scattering guitar run, the thumping drum, and a chorus that delivers the richest vocals, either guy, in the Van Halen catalog. From "Always one more" to "what that means," a rousing from-the-guts callout made all the riper for being a love missive to a recording studio.

It's not at all tenable to say that a band that would go on to make an album titled *For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge* had grown up. But it did feel that way. Hagar was so earnest, where Dave had been jaunty. With *5150* it suddenly became apparent that being in Van Halen was serious business. Until then, we'd thought, they were just having fun.





mischief and wonder, turned Led Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll" into a two handed guitar-neck tapping ode to ear-splitting joy), the two were best buds.

Soon Sammy bought a house two doors down from Eddie and Valerie's second home in Malibu. "Eddie and I yell out each other's windows," Hagar told *Rolling Stone*. "This band really does have a lot of fun hanging out together. [Maybe] in 10 years we'll hate each other like every other band. But I don't think so."

The two liked to race their supercharged, luxuriously priced cars at dangerous speeds from the beach to the studio and back again, often with Eddie half in the bag. He would later confess that he rarely did anything, including driving, without hitting the sauce that he felt fueled his creativity and calmed the paralyzing nervousness that had stalked him since childhood. "The funny thing is," Eddie would tell *Esquire* decades later, "I certainly didn't do it to party. I would do blow and I would drink, and then I would go to my room and write music."

The first Hagar era album, titled *5150,* was released March 24, 1986, and shot to No. 1 on the *Billboard* chart, a feat none of the group's previous six albums had achieved. Reviews were nonetheless mixed. (The *Village Voice*'s Robert Christgau gave it a C-plus.) Even so, 21,000 unsentimental fans at the Alpine Valley Music Theater in East Troy, Wisconsin, were ecstatic that June during a stop on Van Halen's maiden outing with Hagar.

Sammy prowled the stage, leaped from the drum risers, and bellowed through his headset mike, freeing his hands to play rhythm to Eddie's leads. Fans welcomed Hagar by decking the

RECORD SALES SOARED with Hagar on the roster and Eddie (left in 1993) expanding his creativity. Following *5150* (above), the next three studio albums—*OU812*, *For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge*, and *Balance*—also earned multiplatinum status and topped the *Billboard* charts.



hall with homemade banners that blared bedsheet Bronx cheers at the dearly departed. "Happy trails, David Lee Who?" read one. And another featured a photo of Roth crossed out and the words "No Bozos!"

The slagging, and Hagar's hand in it, rankled many Van Halen fans. Throughout the tour and many to come, Hagar dissed Roth from the stage, pulling fans from the audience to sing what would endure as Van Halen's sole No. 1 hit single, the Roth-led "Jump," and once picked up a Roth glossy tossed to the stage and set it on fire with a cigarette lighter. Kevin Dodds, who turned his lifelong obsession with the band into a well-researched 2011 book, *Edward Van Halen: A Definitive Biography*, recalled seeing a "Drop Dead Dave" banner at a concert when he was 14. "There was something about that that bothered me," Dodds wrote. "I loved *5150* at the time, but I also worshipped the six [albums] with Dave. Even at such a young age, the apparent dismissal of those first six albums absolutely did not feel right."

Nor did it to Eddie. As much as he engaged in a war of words with Roth in the aftermath of their split, he was like a divorced dad enjoying a second marriage who might gripe about his ex, but would draw the line at trashing the kids they created. In a piece about the 1986 tour, *Rolling Stone* reported that Roth's former bandmates asked Hagar to cool the hot barbs he was slinging

at his predecessor. We all said, 'Come on, you don't have to go that far,'" Eddie recalled.

But backstage at the Alpine, no one was shy about celebrating Van Halen's emancipation from famous edicts of Dave's that had banned blondes who might turn heads away from his, and wives who might keep stage door babes at bay. When Eddie and Valerie were newlyweds, Roth once told him to not let her attend a show where press was present because she might taint the band's gladiator image. When she did join her husband on later tours as tensions between Eddie and Dave were high, it was "hell," Valerie told *People*. "Eddie and I used to hang out by ourselves in the tuning room. The mood was absolutely miserable."

But no more. Both Hagar, who had been married for 17 years by then, and Anthony brought their wives and kids along for the *5150* Tour.

Unknown to fans as the tour wound its way across North America from March to November, Van Halen's apparently very good year was bracketed by tragedy.

As the band had been putting the finishing touches on the first Hagar-era album in January, Eddie was ecstatic when Valerie learned she was pregnant. But in March, weeks before the release of the album and the beginning of the tour, she miscarried. "Ed brought me tea and soup while I recuperated," she wrote in her 2008 autobiography, *Losing It: And Gaining My Life Back One Pound at a Time*. "He was sweet and tender."

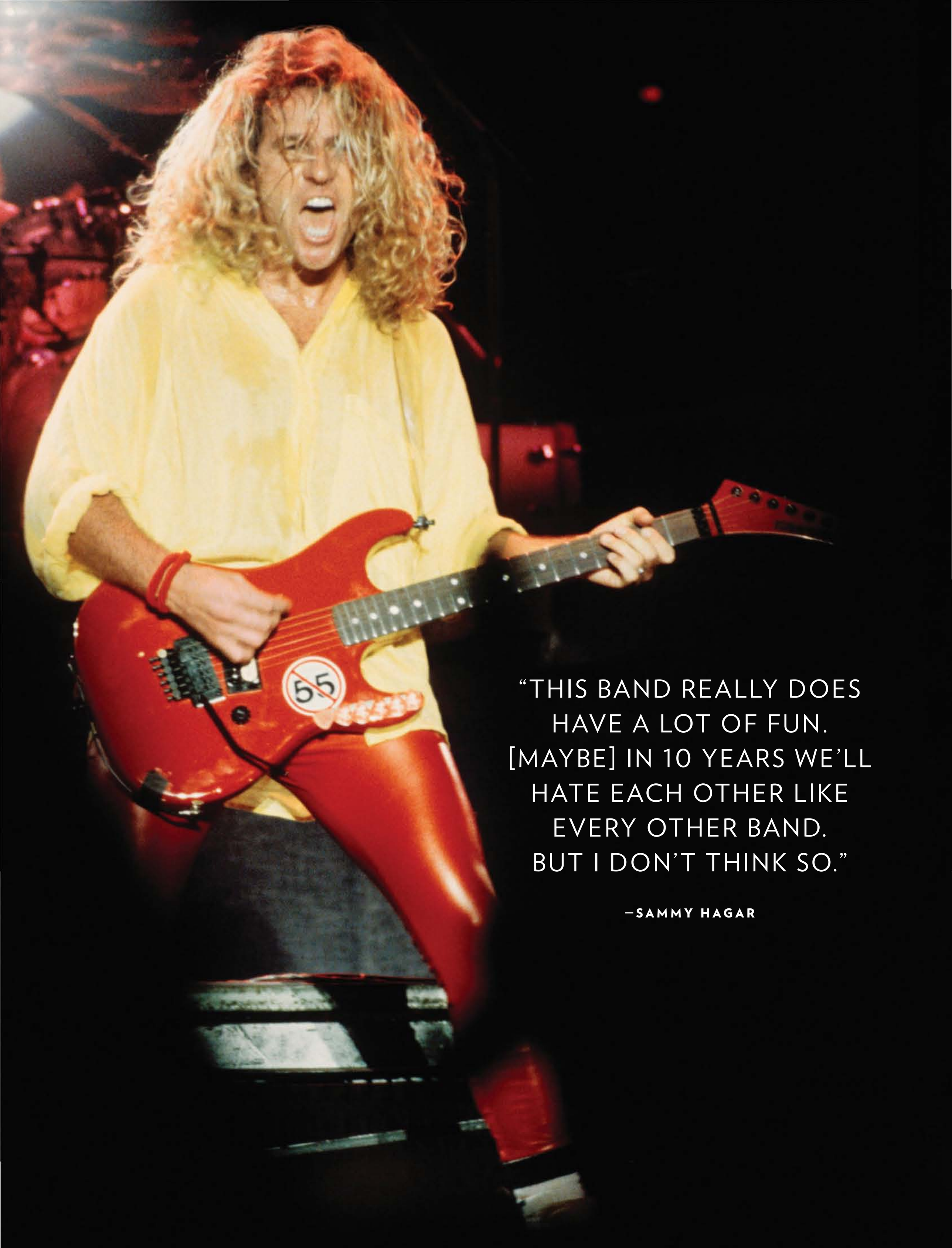
Two months into the tour, Eddie and Alex received more dreadful news. Their father, Jan, had suffered a major heart attack. The brothers and Valerie flew by private jet to L.A. and hurried to his hospital bed. Jan, whose health had long been compromised by what Dodds termed a near lifetime of "nonstop drinking and smoking," survived. But his prognosis was grave.

By tour's end, Eddie and Alex had



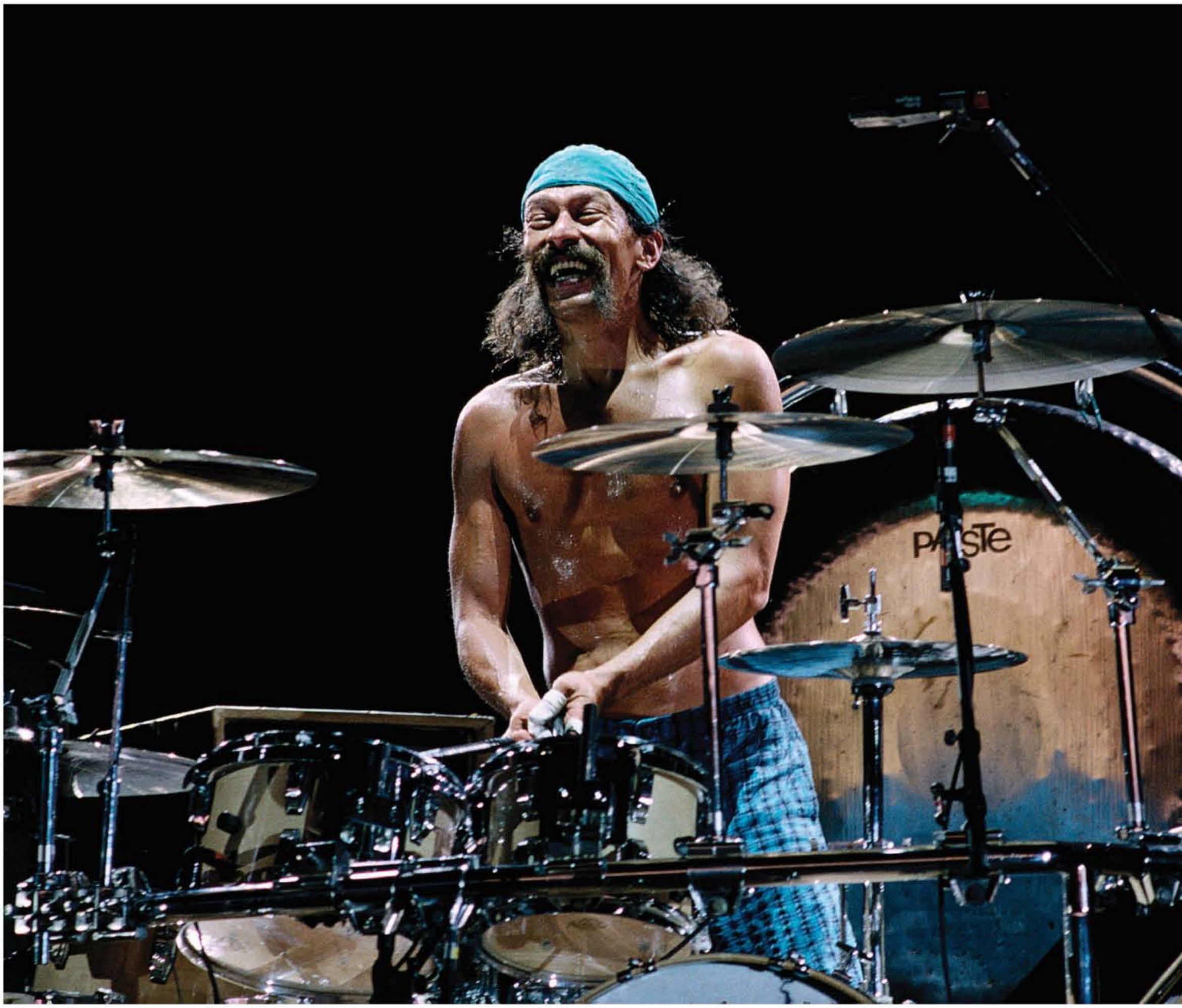


BY THE MID-1990S, THE tension between Hagar and the band was hard to ignore. "He was especially irritated by the fact that I began to get involved with the lyric writing," Eddie told *Guitar World* in 1996. "Sammy would say, 'You never complained about the lyrics before!' Well I wasn't sober before, and I wasn't even listening to the lyrics!"



“THIS BAND REALLY DOES HAVE A LOT OF FUN. [MAYBE] IN 10 YEARS WE’LL HATE EACH OTHER LIKE EVERY OTHER BAND. BUT I DON’T THINK SO.”

—SAMMY HAGAR



ALEX AND EDDIE TEAMED up to write the instrumental ballad "Respect the Wind" for the soundtrack to the 1996 blockbuster *Twister*. Alex (in 1993, above) actually played the keyboards (rather than drums), with Eddie on guitar. The song earned the brothers a Grammy nomination.

barely a month at home to spend time with their father, who died in December at age 66—he lived just one year longer than his youngest son would. Among those who called with condolences was David Lee Roth, who had grown close with Jan and had urged the brothers to get their father to play clarinet on "Big Bad Bill," on 1982's *Diver Down*.

Jan had a deathbed wish for his two boys. His own health destroyed by alcohol, he begged them to quit before it was too late.

Alex was able to kick the habit a few months later. "He took the vow and never drank again," Hagar noted. "I kinda think of it as me driving down the freeway at breakneck speed," Alex told *Rolling Stone* in 1988, "and luckily I saw the sign that said, 'End of Freeway.'"

As for Eddie, "I think he relied more heavily on alcohol than ever before," Bertinelli later wrote. With his drinking continuing unabated, she staged an intervention. But after a stint at the Betty Ford clinic, Eddie stopped at a bar on the way home, got loaded, and got a drunk driving ticket to show for it.

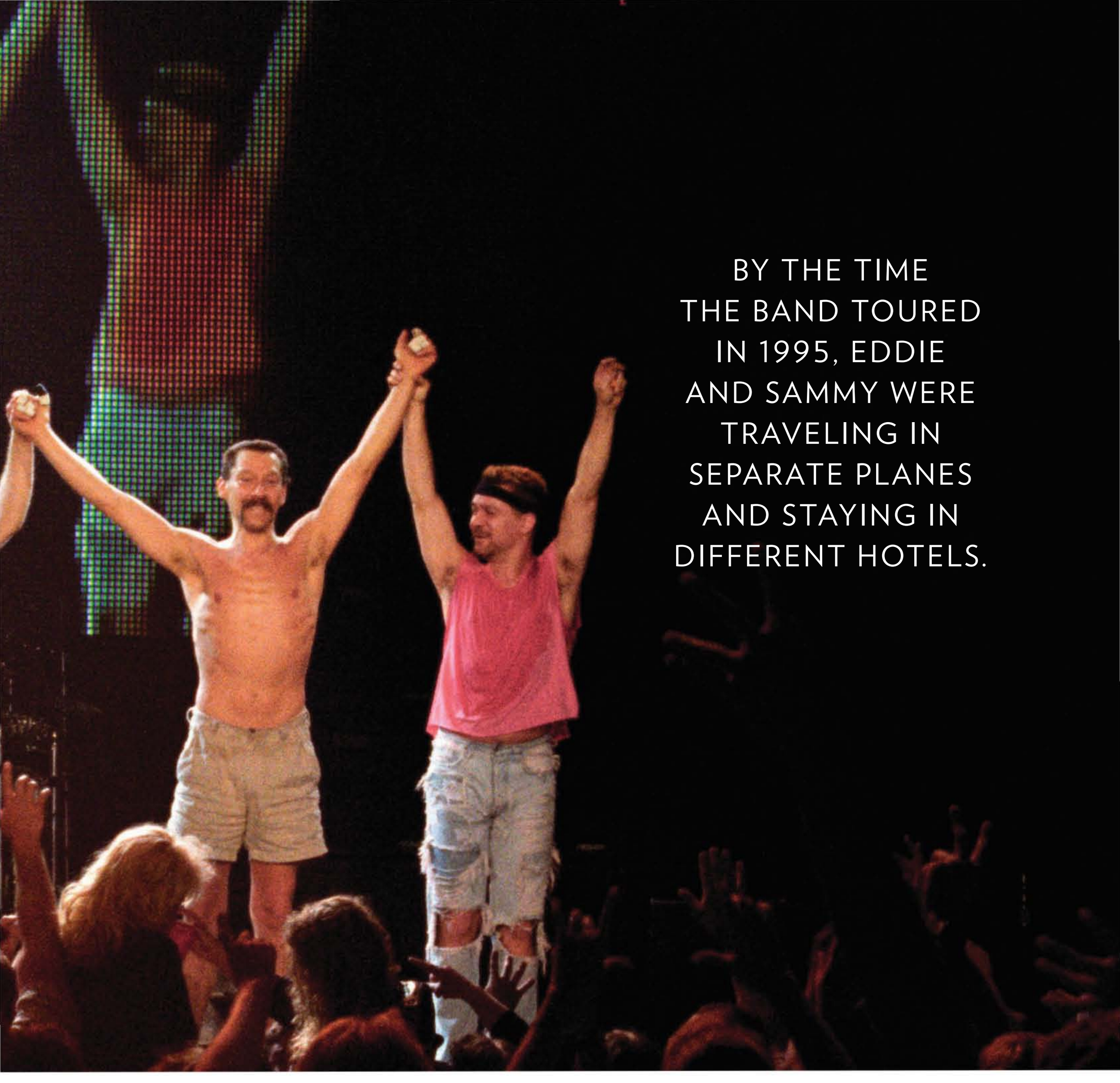
After an interlude of sobriety, he showed up at Sammy's house in full Keith Richards mode. Bare chested, with a guitar slung around his neck and a bottle of Jack Daniels in hand, he told Sammy "The old lady kicked me out."



Eddie struggled to quit drinking and keep his marriage afloat through four more FrankenHalen albums: 1988's *OU812* ("This one's for you, Pa," read the dedication); *For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge* (the title, Hagar's idea, made schoolboy fans titter and older fans and critics cringe when the album was released in 1991, at a time when serious-minded bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam were transforming rock); *Live: Right Here, Right Now,* in 1993; and 1995's widely panned *Balance,* the last hurrah of the Hagar era.

It didn't help when, with Valerie pregnant with their son, Wolfgang (named in honor of Mozart), Eddie attended Lamaze classes with the strong scent of alcohol on his breath. Redeeming himself when Wolfie was born in March 1991, Eddie was overjoyed and all in, changing diapers and getting up for late-night feedings.

Meanwhile, Eddie's partnership with Hagar was fraying. Things had begun to go bad during 1988's Monsters of Rock Tour when Sammy lost his voice in the middle of a performance in Dallas and abruptly cut the concert short. "[T]he brothers went nuclear on me," Hagar wrote. "They crucified me for that." Then, with Eddie drinking heavily during *Carnal Knowledge* recording sessions, Hagar stormed out of the studio,



BY THE TIME
THE BAND TOURED
IN 1995, EDDIE
AND SAMMY WERE
TRAVELING IN
SEPARATE PLANES
AND STAYING IN
DIFFERENT HOTELS.

accusing producer Andy Johns of erasing one of his vocal tracks. Things deteriorated from there, with rows between the two over Eddie's insistence that Sammy, who was divorced by then and living with his girlfriend in Hawaii, fly back to L.A. to rerecord his vocals for *Right Here, Right Now.*

By the time the band toured in 1995, Eddie and Sammy were traveling in separate planes and staying in different hotels. The final break came in June 1996 when, Hagar told the *Los Angeles Times,* Eddie fired him for refusing to rewrite a song lyric. "'You never do what I ask you to do, you're really stubborn,'" Hagar said Eddie had told him. "'You're a solo artist in this band, so you might as well really be a solo artist.'"

That was all but the end of the band Mo Ostin once wanted to call Van Hagar. And soon Eddie was on the lookout for a new front man to graft on to his enduring rock monster. ●

THE 1995 TOUR (INCLUDING a stop at the Target Center in Minneapolis, above) was Hagar's last. "That was a really, really good trip for 11 years," he told *Fortune* in 2000. "Great music, great friends—it just ended bad. It's like a bad movie. No, it's like a great movie with a bad ending."

CHAPTER 3

ENCORE PERFOR

THE BAND'S LATER YEARS FEATURED A REVOLVING DOOR OF MUSICIANS, NONE MORE NOTEWORTHY THAN DAVID LEE ROTH MAKING HIS LONG-AWAITED RETURN

BY JED GOTTLIEB



MANCES



THE FINAL INCARNATION OF Van Halen kicked off their 2007 tour in Charlotte, North Carolina, with 16-year-old Wolfgang joining father Eddie, Uncle Alex, and prodigal son Roth. "It feels completely natural, strangely enough, after this many summers," Roth said when announcing the tour. "I myself am certainly more aware, than ever, of how valuable this band is to me and my history."

VAN HALEN FANS SPENT MUCH OF 1996 puzzling over who was and who wasn't in the band. They weren't the only ones. Even the members themselves couldn't settle on a lineup. That year elicited a lot of head-scratching, but it also put Van Halen on a long and winding path that eventually led to a high-kicking, higher-volume reunion with David Lee Roth, a homecoming to the style and swagger that originally powered Pasadena's ultimate party band.

In 1996, shortly after Van Halen's relationship with Sammy Hagar fell apart, MTV invited Eddie, Alex, and Michael Anthony to present an award at the network's annual Video Music Awards on September 4. Trumping the surprise of the night's winners, the three walked onstage with Diamond Dave. The audience went nuts. Cheering and hooting, the crowd gave the band a full 30-second standing ovation that completely overshadowed the award the group was there to present. Beck took home the Moonman for Best Male Video but Roth, positively jittery, giddy, and grinning a mile wide, dominated the stage.

"We have to make an announcement, we have to address a subject here," Roth said, ignoring the teleprompter script. "This is the first time



GARY CHERONE IS THE ANSWER to the trivia question "Who was the *other* lead singer of Van Halen?" He recently told *Rolling Stone* that he was starstruck during that brief stint. "I had the privilege of being in the band, but I did see it as well as a fan, even when I was there," said Cherone (with Eddie in 1998). "I never forgot that."

THE BACKSTAGE DRAMA resumed when Hagar reunited with Van Halen for a 2004 tour. "I was just hoping it was going to be great and everybody was going to be happy and a big love fest and just go at it again but it wasn't that at all," he recalled in 2011. "It was the complete opposite. It was a horror fest."

HAGAR'S EXIT AFTER THE 2004 TOUR LED INTO THE LONGEST PERIOD OF INACTIVITY IN THE BAND'S THEN 30-YEAR HISTORY.



we've actually stood onstage together in over a decade."

Eddie was clearly uncomfortable with Roth's trademark charm and chattiness and the reconciliation did not last long—some reports had the two nearly coming to blows backstage. A few weeks later, on October 22, Van Halen delivered its first compilation, *Best Of–Volume I,* which topped the charts and has since been certified triple platinum. Along with favorites from both the Roth and Hagar eras, the package included a pair of new songs featuring Roth, and they were scorchers. "Can't Get This Stuff No More" evoked the sexy strut of "Drop Dead Legs"; the dirty groove of "Me Wise Magic" winked at the menace of 1981's *Fair Warning* while foreshadowing the progressive approach the band would take just months later with singer Gary Cherone. But the band made it clear during the sessions that working with Roth didn't mean he had won back a full-time spot at the helm. When these songs didn't snowball into a fresh Roth-fronted album or tour, Dave was stung.

"It's no secret, nor am I ashamed of my unabashed rapture at the prospect of resurrecting the original Van Halen," he wrote in an open letter dated October 2. "And so I apologize to my fans and my supporters, and to MTV… It sickens me that the 'reunion' as seen on MTV was nothing more than a publicity stunt."

The Van Halens and Roth weren't on the same page. This proved to be a good thing. The band never could force chemistry. It needed to take a few more turns before reclaiming the fire that burned through its late-'70s and early-'80s masterpieces.

Ready to write, record, and experiment with unfamiliar styles and sounds, Van Halen recruited Cherone for 1998 album *Van Halen III.* If outsiders considered Cherone an odd choice, they probably hadn't spent much time with his past band, Extreme.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 79

PARTYING LIKE IT'S 1984

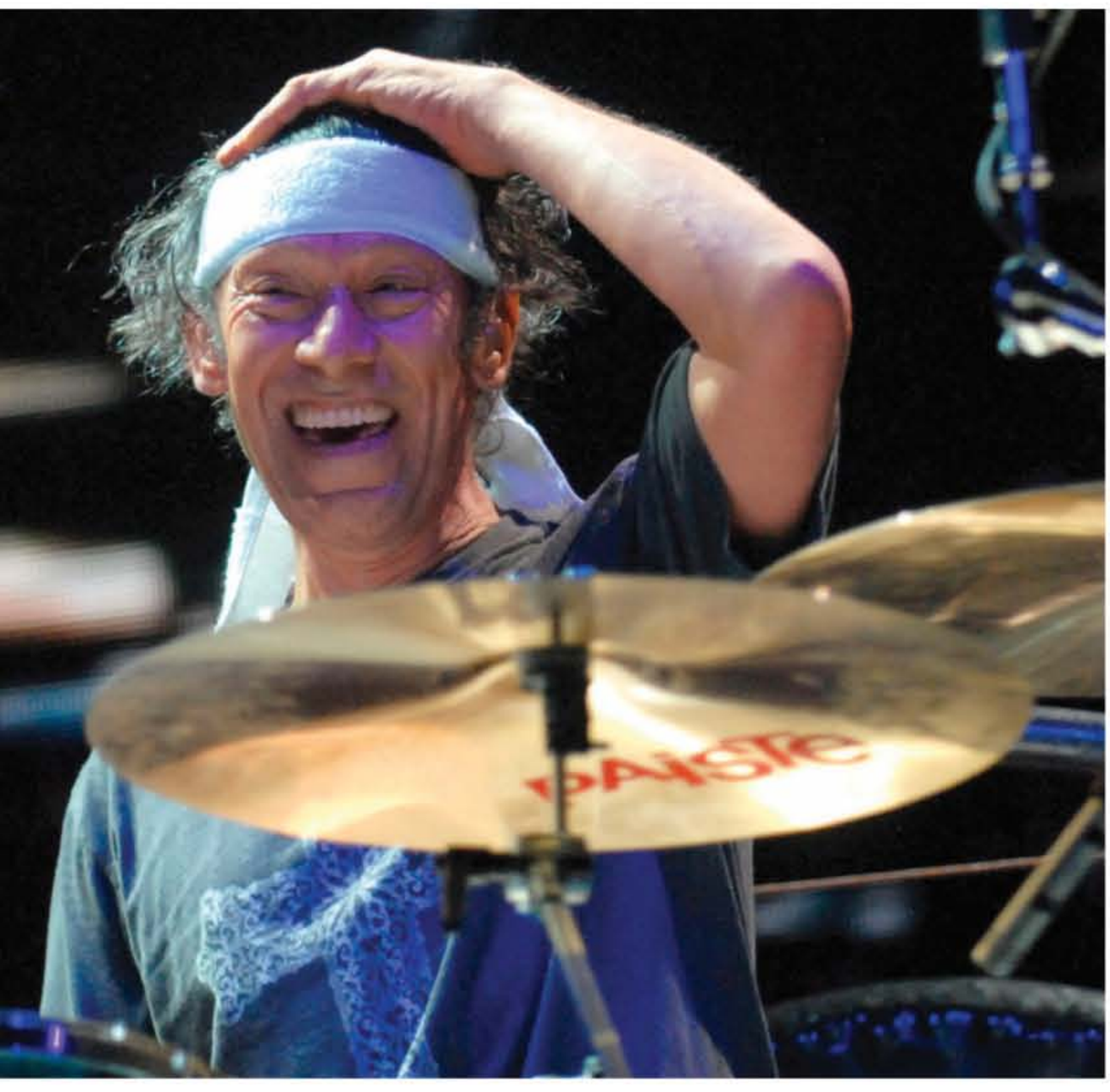
AFTER MORE THAN TWO DECADES OF ANTICIPATION, A REUNION TOUR KICKED OFF IN 2007. HERE'S HOW *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY* REVIEWED OPENING NIGHT

BY DAN SNIERSON

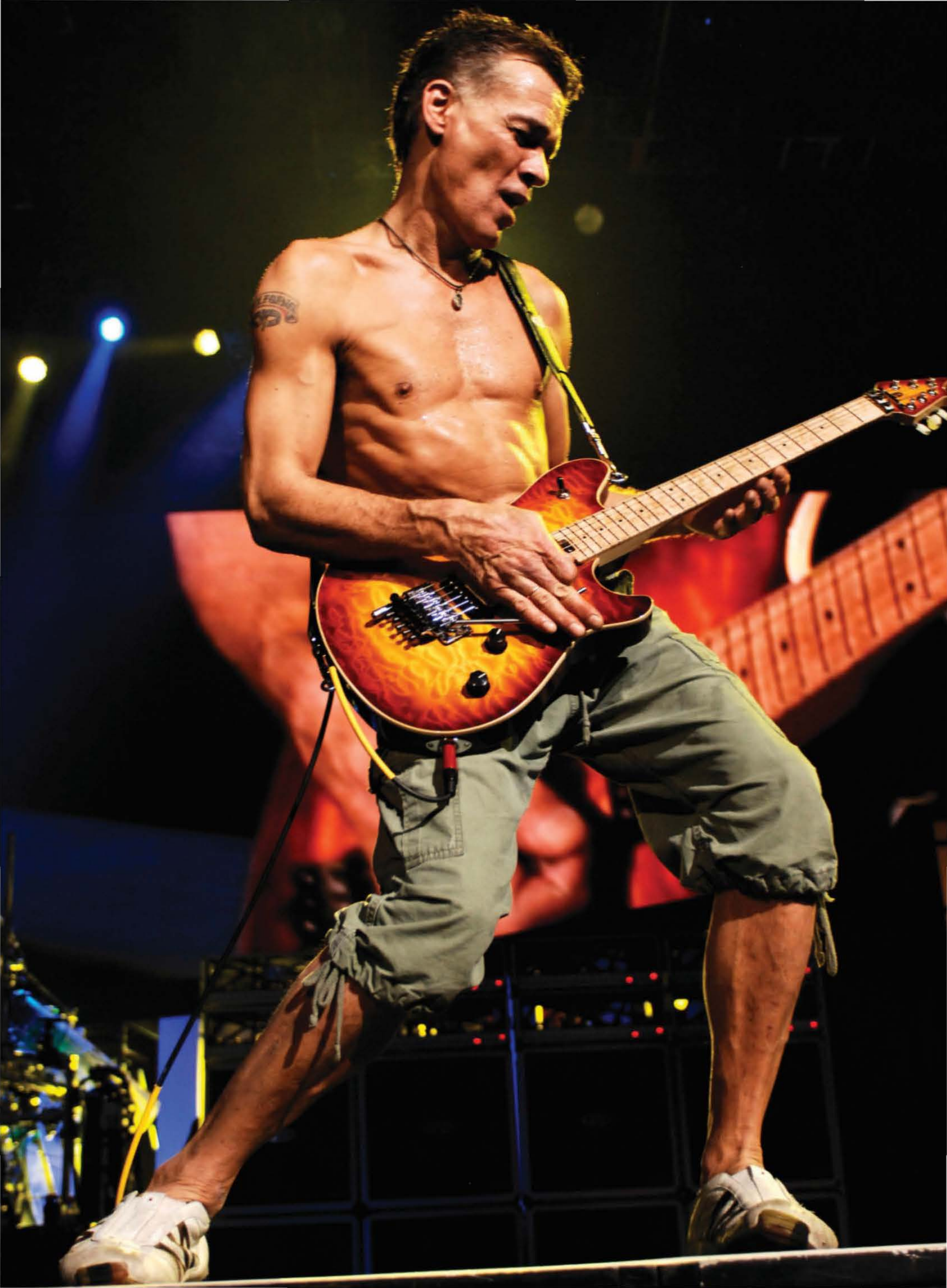
Before we get to what happened during Van Halen's first concert with David Lee Roth since 1984—and, oh, lots did!—here's what didn't happen. Diamond Dave didn't break out the assless chaps. Eddie Van Halen didn't trip over his whammy bar. His bassist son, Wolfgang, didn't wet himself. The band didn't even break up onstage. Actually, something more startling did go down: Van Halen took an encouraging step toward reclaiming their hard-rock throne—or at least their good name. Not bad for a few fiftysomethings and a 16-year-old. How would VH kick off this 40-date tour that once-mulleted, now-graying fans have prayed for since high school detention? (They trekked to the Charlotte Bobcats Arena in North Carolina from all over the country, fearing the band might implode before reaching a venue near them.) Roth waved a giant red flag—holy omen?—and then VH blazed through their multiplatinum catalog of catchy rockers ("Panama," "Unchained," "Beautiful Girls") as if there was much to prove. Which, of course, there was. After the bitter '85 split with Roth, myriad botched reunions, and lead-singer musical chairs with Sammy Hagar (successful) and Gary Cherone (suckcessful)—plus the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame no-show and the dumping of original bassist Michael Anthony for Wolfgang—the band had transmogrified into Spinal Finger Tap. Yet on this night, the Halen turned rather mighty again. Midway through "I'm the One," the first of several cool surprises, they stopped cold and soaked in the *whoo!*s for a solid minute. "It took us 20 years to get this f---in' far!" bellowed a touched Roth, who left any tensions with Eddie behind, or backstage. The duo were all smiles and high fives. (Cue *Naked Gun* scene in which dog embraces mailman, Muslim hugs Jew.) Among the sights and sounds: a tight-abbed Roth in Vegas-y matador jackets, his well-worn voice sounding unusually fresh 'n' focused. Despite perching a top hat on his crotch, he radiated as much giddiness as horniness—grateful for redemption. Ditto for Shreddie. After spotty work on 2004's reunion tour with Hagar, the newly rehabbed guitar wizard stunned with mean riffs, otherworldly squeals, and blistering fretwork, anchored by drummer brother Alex Van Halen's thunderstickery. (Still, their indulgent solo showcases begat a few urinal breaks.) And up there with his decades-older mentors, Wolfie resembled a contest winner, but calmly issued sturdy grooves and vocals. Anthony's conviviality and sublime harmonies were missed, yes, but not mourned. What to make of this? Is it one-time wonderful? A triumph of middle-aged will? A future of CDs, tours, breakups, and makeups? We've got devil horns on one hand, fingers crossed on the other.







THE 2007 TOUR WAS A MAJOR success. Roth recreated his chemistry with the Van Halen brothers, and Wolfgang proved he was worthy of the stage. "There was so much weight on my shoulders to fill the shoes," the teenager told *Guitar World* the following year. "I knew I could do it, but I wanted to say, 'Everybody, hey, I can do it!'"





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 75

While the ballad "More Than Words" didn't fit the VH template, the cream of Extreme's catalog had the rugged thrust and flamboyant bravado Ed and Dave embodied in their early years. Extreme songs such as "Play with Me" and "Kid Ego" reverently paid homage to that atomic energy. At least one person had zero doubts about the fit: Eddie Van Halen.

"It was my second day with them and Eddie asked me to join the band," Cherone said. "I'm like, 'Do you want to ask the other guys first?' And he said, 'Oh, yeah, yeah.'"

Eddie and Cherone began putting together material on day one, literally—the two worked out a chunk of a tune hours after first meeting. The singer says the guitarist had "an intrinsic genius," a "childlike quality, very sweet, very gentle," and he felt a strong connection to him. But Cherone and Ed's affection for one another paled in comparison to the siblings' unspoken bond. "Alex and Eddie would go on a five-minute jam and I would witness this almost telepathic thing between the brothers," Cherone said. "I saw this almost every time they jammed."

By Van Halen standards, *III* underperformed. By the standards of virtually any other band, the album was a smash: It debuted on the *Billboard* 200 album chart at No. 4, and spun off the Mainstream Rock Songs chart topper "Without You" and two other radio singles ("Fire in the Hole" and "One I Want"). The disc displayed the lineup's range from straight rock to prog tangents to experiments with programmed beats, but after a celebrated string of global dates, the band amicably parted ways with Cherone.

ROTH HAS HAD MANY PURSUITS (including a stint as an EMT driver in New York City and a growing passion for painting), but he seemed most at home onstage with Van Halen (above, in 2007). After Eddie died, he tweeted "What a Long Great Trip It's Been." Though Eddie's health caused some tour cancellations in 2008, he still showed off an impressive physique (opposite).



As a new century rolled in, fans had little to keep them hopeful. In 2004, the brothers made amends with Hagar long enough for three new songs (all on that year's *Best of Both Worlds* compilation, which went to No. 3 and quickly earned platinum status) and a summer tour. But the trek's end led into the longest period of inactivity in the band's then 30-year history. However, in classic Van Halen fashion, something that looked doomed from the outside was on the verge of blooming into a whole new era.

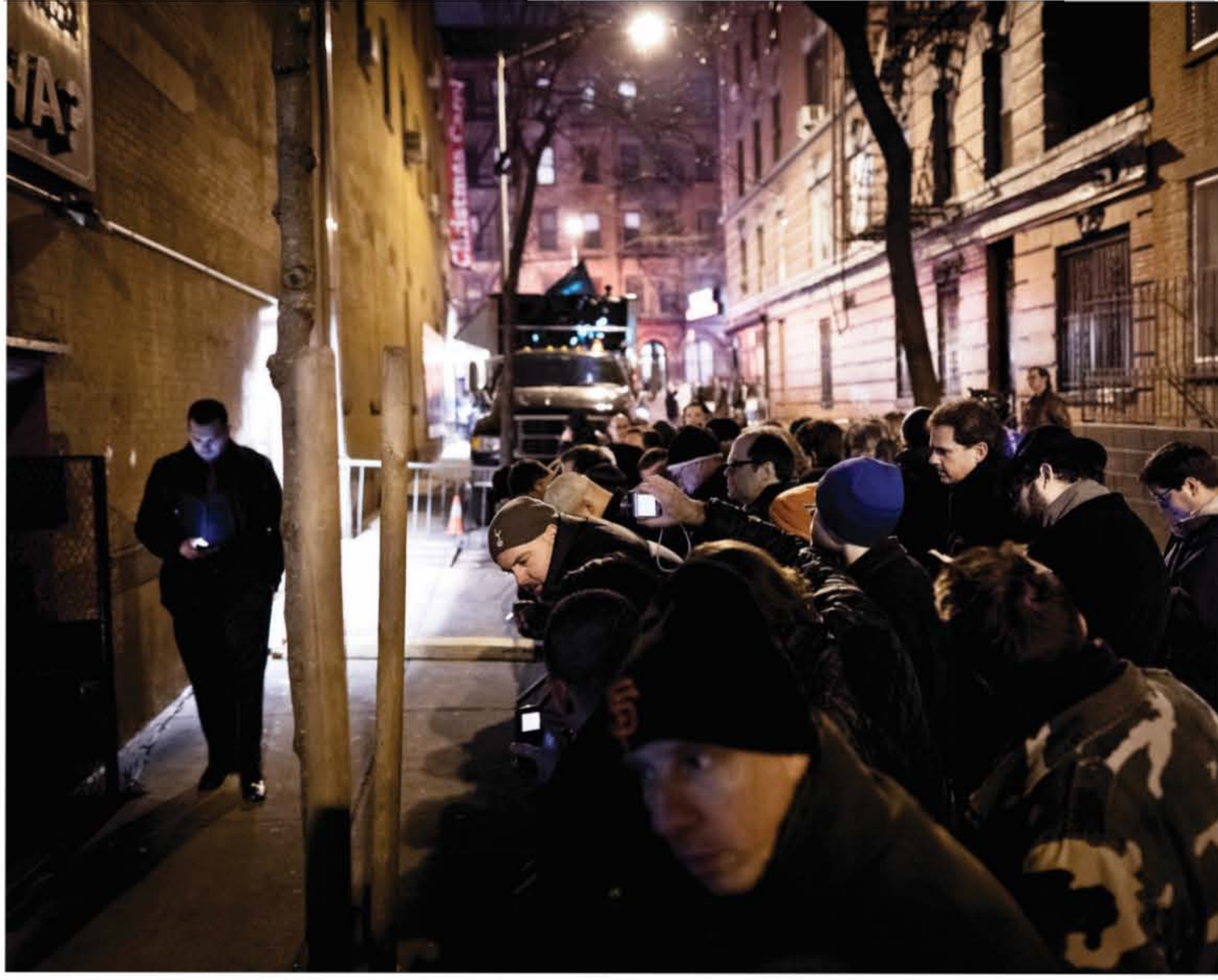
In April 2007, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame welcomed Van Halen into its hallowed pantheon (a long overdue move). But only Hagar and Anthony showed up to the ceremony. The pair blasted through "Why Can't This Be Love" with Paul Shaffer and the house band behind them. The moment could have capped the VH legacy. Instead, a few months later, the band rebounded spectacularly.

On August 13, the Van Halen brothers appeared at a press conference with two surprising guests: David Lee Roth and Eddie's son, Wolfgang Van Halen, a baby-faced 16-year-old at the time. Once again, Roth couldn't hide his glee. But this time, the Van Halen family seemed equally elated at what was to come.

"This is not a reunion, this is a new band," Roth said. "This is a revision with hits that you're so familiar with, it's as familiar as the roof of your own mouth is to you. But the ambition has nothing to do with old history. Usually when a band comes back like us it's rockers with walkers and this is everything but. Meet us in the future, not the pasture."

When asked if Michael Anthony would be part of the band, Roth brushed by the question. In the coming days, the singer would take to calling the new lineup "three quarters original, one quarter inevitable." Anthony





TO CREATE BUZZ FOR A *Different Kind of Truth*, the band held a concert at tiny Café Wha? in New York's Greenwich Village (a venue founded by Roth's uncle Manny Roth) in January 2012. "We used to play gigs like this five nights a week, and we used to do five 45-minute sets a night," Roth told the small crowd. Fans lined up outside to hear the music coming out of the building and grab autographs.

had long been a key to the VH sound. From his earth-shaking bass line on "Runnin' with the Devil" to his high-voltage vocals, which elevated the appeal of songs from "Women in Love" to "Top of the World." The band would now depend on a high schooler to add those bits of magic.

On September 27, 2007, Eddie, Alex, and Diamond Dave stormed a stage together for the first time since 1984. In front of a capacity crowd of 18,000 at Charlotte Bobcats Arena in North Carolina, the band tore through a set of classics. They did an epic take on the Kinks' "You Really Got Me," the pop-with-a-pinch-of-moxie of "Dance the Night Away," and the expected-but-still-thrilling encore "Jump." Every doubt, every fear, every question fans had about how three men in their fifties and a kid would do evaporated in an attack of feedback, drums, and kung fu kicks—reviewers even cheered Wolfgang's bass and vocal skills. During "Hot for Teacher," Roth added some extra (and well-earned) emphasis to the line, "I heard you missed us, we're back!"

While the reunion tour had plenty of bumps, with the band canceling some dates due to Eddie's health problems, the six dozen concerts Van Halen put on across North America delivered shockingly consistent and energetic performances (and raked in $93 million). Because the band was famously unpredictable, no one could be sure if Van Halen would make good on Dave's promise when, at the tour's final date in June 2008, he told the packed Van Andel Arena in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that the band would "see everyone next time." But the best of the new millennium was yet to come.

In January 2011, the band entered Henson Studios in Hollywood with John Shanks, a producer known for adding shine to records by Bon Jovi, Miley Cyrus, and Celine Dion. Often with Wolfgang leading the charge, the band unearthed '70s demos full of that archetypal magic found on "Runnin' with the Devil" and "Unchained." A few months later, the band finished sessions at Eddie's 5150 Studios. The icons let their creations out into the world on February 7, 2012, with *A Different Kind of Truth*. The sound and songs revealed a Van Halen in love with being Van Halen once again.

On the album Roth got back behind

the wheel for more ridiculous rock star-isms, an impish tour guide in a land of heavy metal riffs and glammed-up lounge music. Perfect Dave moments came during the break in "As Is," where he opines, "It's not who you squeeze but who returns to once again squeeze you, no doubt / Love 'em all I says and let Cupid sort 'em out" and his flashback to "Hot for Teacher" on "Blood and Fire" with him insisting "Told ya I was comin' back / Say you missed me / Say it like ya mean it."

Naturally, Eddie sprinted right alongside Roth, reminding fans that the guitar god reigned supreme among shredders. Many tracks saw him echoing his past—see "Stay Frosty," a spiritual and artistic sequel to "Ice Cream Man." But Eddie also smiled at his many imitators' ideas (Randy Rhoads's breakneck neoclassical runs, Steve Vai's slippery squeals, even Tom Morello's metallic grinding) before blowing on by them. *A Different Kind of Truth* became an exhaustive dictionary of Eddie's virtuosity.

While the music market had moved on from the speedy, smart, and sassy rock of Van Halen, diehards and converts embraced the band's first full set of originals in over a decade. Critics gushed about the return to form. Fans sent the record to No. 2 on the *Billboard* 200. Then came the tour, 60-some shows from New York to Los Angeles to Tokyo featuring a handful of worthy new songs slipped in between hits.

For guys famous for hating each other, the band radiated joy. But while both the album and tour signaled the band had plenty of creative life left, Eddie's battle with cancer stole too much time from the group and a follow-up never appeared. Eddie's death on October 6, 2020, at the age of 65 ended Van Halen. But the band, and the man, will be forever unchained. Generations keep discovering the visceral pleasures of shouting "Panama" at full volume, playing air guitar to "Eruption," and happily arguing over "Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love" versus "Why Can't This Be Love." ●

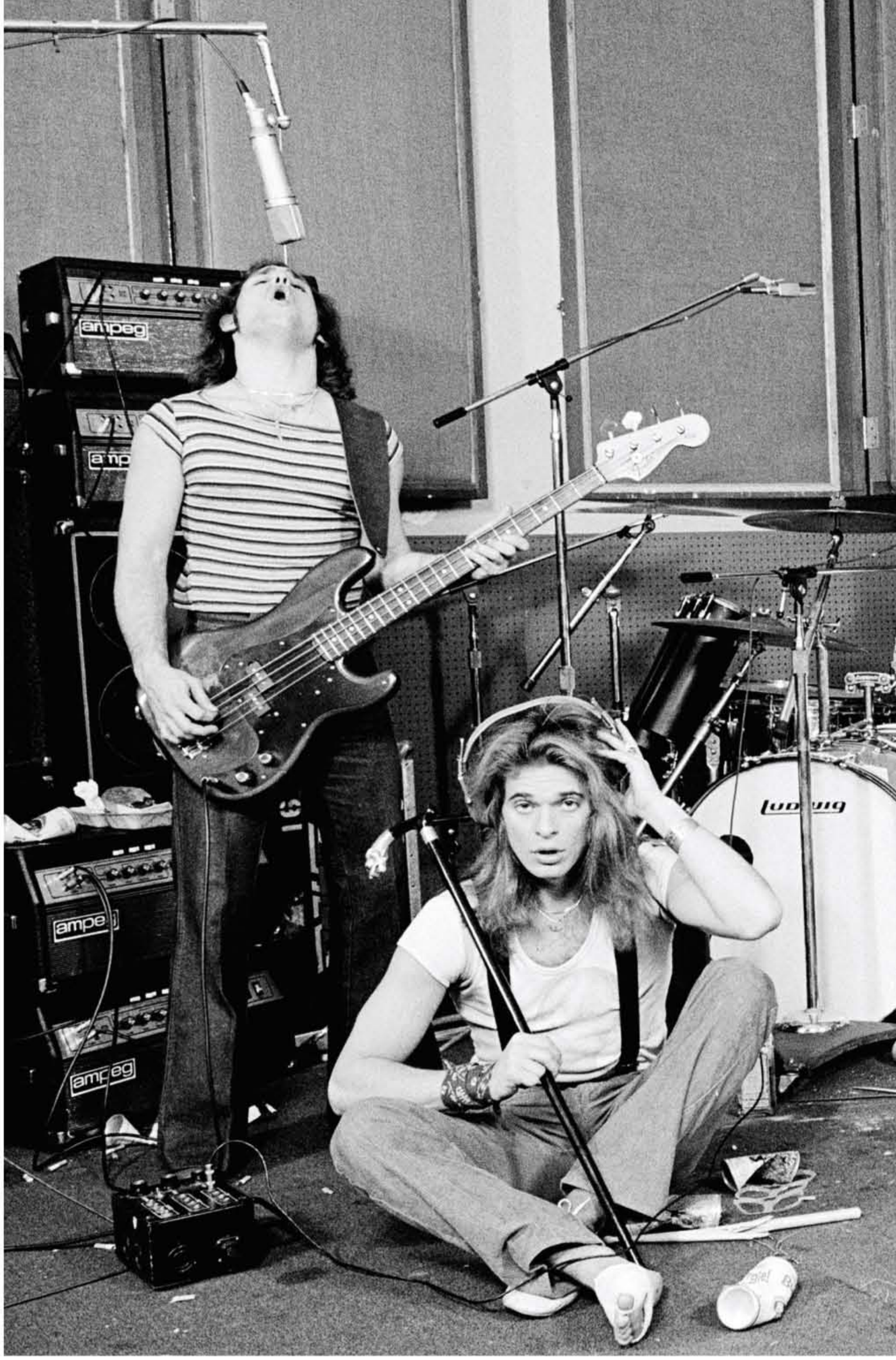


ROTH BROUGHT THE SAME boundless energy to his second stint with the band. "Nobody well adjusted ever got my job, much less kept it this long," he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2012. "There's some grasping drive, and it precludes self-satisfaction . . . You're always questioning."

ROCK REDEFINED

A DEDICATED FAN AND RENOWNED ESSAYIST TAKES A LOOK AT THE BAND'S FORMIDABLE (AND SOMETIMES COMPLICATED) LEGACY

BY CHUCK KLOSTERMAN



I LOVE VAN HALEN. VAN HALEN WAS the first rock music I ever loved, before I knew who they were or what they were doing. The band was together for more than 40 years, although "together" feels like a bit of a stretch. The Van Halen time line notoriously comprises two strikingly different units (and officially three different units, and arguably four different units). With the lone exception of AC/DC, no other rock group has ever bifurcated its career so successfully (Fleetwood Mac and Genesis come close, but not quite). They are, in myriad contexts, the high-profile exception to otherwise inflexible rules: Classically trained virtuosos who made music for getting hammered in the parking lot. A metal band that rarely played metal. A legendary live act consistently criticized for terrible live performances. A caricature of leering masculinity that proved unusually inclusive to female audiences. The embodiment of American exceptionalism, driven by two Dutch-Indo immigrants who could barely speak English when they arrived in Pasadena. There are simply no other groups like this. They were copied constantly and no one ever got it right.

Van Halen was pure monoculture, achieved in an era when that aspiration was still common and admirable. The singularity of their aesthetic was so recognizable that it became a kind of representational shorthand for youth-oriented movie directors: The soundtrack for burnout disenchantment in *Over the Edge,* the platonic dream of Jeff Spicoli in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High,* the language of extraterrestrial life in *Back to the Future,* and the validation of rockist sensibilities in *Air Heads.* Only Led Zeppelin is more archetypical of the genre. Yet the last 20 years were complicated for Van Halen, for reasons both self-inflicted and beyond their control.

Had Van Halen disbanded after their 10th album (1993's *Live: Right Here, Right Now*), their catalog would border on bulletproof. But they were too young to retire and too popular to quit, so they just kept going (albeit erratically and devoid of schedule). That decision was justifiable, particularly since perseverance is traditionally rewarded by the sands of time. For Van Halen, however, the opposite

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has occurred. The cyclical nature of cultural significance has not always worked in their favor. A useful comparison is the career arc of Black Sabbath, perhaps the only band whose sonic influence on hard rock is more pervasive. Throughout the late '80s and early '90s, various bastardized incarnations of Sabbath released a string of subpar albums that temporarily cheapened the memory of the band's canonical work. Their will to survive made them figuratively nonexistent. But when the original Black Sab reunited in 1997, the group's reputation was re-invented in totality, light years beyond the conventional critical perception at the height of their powers. At this point, even the allegedly embarrassing Sab records that were supposedly dooming their legacy (1987's *The Eternal Idol,* 1990's *Tyr*) have been sympathetically reassessed. One would have expected a similar trajectory when Van Halen reunited with David Lee Roth for 2012's *A Different Kind of Truth,* a comeback album primarily consisting of updated demo tracks from the '70s. Yet this wide-angle

THE CREATIVE COLLABORATION between Eddie and Roth was straightforward. Eddie would compose the music, then Roth would (quickly) write the lyrics to fit the song. Above: The original foursome at Sunset Sound Studio in Hollywood in 1978.

"EVERYONE BLAMED ME for the freakin' keyboard playing on the Van Hagar era," Hagar told *Guitar World*. "Eddie wanted to do that. He liked playing keyboards, and he was freakin' good at it and he wrote these beautiful songs like 'When It's Love' and 'Why Can't This Be Love.'"



reconsideration did not happen, or perhaps is just starting to happen now.

A fraction of the explanation can be traced to the curious (and somewhat cruel) decision to replace competent bassist Michael Anthony with Eddie Van Halen's competent son, Wolfgang. But the larger explanation involves how the rest of society evolved in the interim. The pop landscape had changed so radically that appreciating the musical style pioneered by Van Halen has become akin to appreciating recent breakthroughs in blacksmithing. To many people born post-grunge, the difference between David Lee Roth and Glenn Miller is negligible. It's easy to imagine an engaged teenage music fan unfamiliar with all but one of Van Halen's songs. Which, both predictably and paradoxically, is part of the reason why, in 2018, I wanted to compile a list, ranking Van Halen's 131 studio releases. Their material deserves deeper, detailed contemplation.

It's not like Van Halen is in any danger of being erased from the historical record. Their commercial popularity has been certified and there's a collective acknowledgment regarding the quality of their musicianship. Pretty much anyone who's seen the video for "Panama" views the band as idealized avatars for a euphoric, consequence-free, hyper-intoxicated lifestyle that (a) could exist only in Southern California, (b) could never exist today, and (c) probably never existed at all, unless you were literally a member of this specific band. The abstract idea of Van Halen remains iconic. The individual musical compositions, however, tend to be lumped into two categories that resist close readings. Songs from the Roth era are marginalized as party anthems designed for strippers, subscribers to *Guitar World* magazine, and guys with unusually strong opinions about how many cylinders a car engine should have. Songs from the Sammy Hagar era are marginalized as well-crafted, nonbombastic radio hits that you can like but never love, unless you're Sammy or whoever concocted the marketing strategy for Crystal Pepsi.

THE ESSENTIAL VAN HALEN PLAYLIST

BY CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

It's tempting to view Van Halen as having many versions of only two songs (one recorded prior to 1985 and the other recorded after). This is reductive and wrong. Moreover, it's an unintentional result of the group's technical proficiency. Eddie Van Halen was the most inventive guitar player of his generation. But he was also a surprisingly stern formalist. Rarely did Mr. Van Halen's music dabble in prog or inaccessibility; instead, he jammed all his unorthodoxy into the claustrophobic confines of a traditional four-piece rock configuration, performed at a volume typically reserved for military aircraft. The core riffs are sophisticated, but also remarkably minimalist; the solos are overstuffed and a little self-derivative, but no two solos are identical and none of them are easy. The downside to this formalism is a superficial sense that many of these songs are interchangeable. The upside is a depth of creativity that takes years to untangle, delivered in a working-class package that roughly equates to the musical experience of eating hot pizza and drinking cold beer.

The VH catalog contains many diamonds and many pearls, but also a lot of pyrite and a few discarded mufflers. The unsurprising preference for most of the world comes from the Roth era, although diehard VH fans tend to be a little less fascistic about that distinction. For sake of transparency, here's a list of things about Van Halen that are sometimes overrated: their sense of humor, their musical heaviness, and the difference in quality between *Van Halen* and *Van Halen II*. Conversely, here's a list of things about Van Halen that get underrated: Roth's prowess as a lyricist, Hagar's aptitude as a performer, most of *Diver Down,* the eerie consistency of the rhythm section, and the degree to which Eddie Van Halen's autodidactic understanding of technology and audio engineering has amplified his preexisting brilliance.

Here's a list of the things about Van Halen that are properly rated: pretty much everything else.

IN A SIMPLE RHYME (1980)

There are three or four different songs here, seamlessly patched together. It has qualities usually associated with rock operas like *Tommy,* although looser and much less heavy-handed. Dave uncharacteristically sings from a position of weakness and everything concludes with a 15-second Godzilla stomp that's sometimes classified as a secret track titled "Growth." From a total band perspective, this is among their most accomplished achievements.

AIN'T TALKIN' 'BOUT LOVE (1978)

A nihilistic attack dog that's the closest Van Halen ever got to punk, including the song "Atomic Punk." The brightness of the sludge is a credit to the eternal sunshine of producer Ted Templeman. Though rarely classified as a historically elite producer, all six of Templeman's Roth-era albums (and a few he did with the Doobie Brothers) stand among the best-sounding recordings of the entire rock era. Obviously, one could argue that Templeman got a little lucky here—early Van Halen records were recorded fast and live, the guitarist contributed more technological knowledge than most engineering Ph.D.s, and there was no way anyone could have anticipated that these long-haired rockers playing parties in Encino would harmonize like the Beach Boys. But still, a lot of other producers might have found a way to blow this, and Templeman did not.

I'M THE ONE (1978)

It careens all over the place, almost as if the song itself is being shaken as it unspools. I'm tempted to say it displays elements of jazz, though I don't know enough about jazz theory to say that with confidence. The takeaway is that this is genuinely insane mainstream rock music, performed by musicians who are always in complete control of the insanity they're creating. There's also a barbershop breakdown just before the conclusion, a choice that seemed kitschy in '78 but now just seems clever.

HOT FOR TEACHER (1984)

Here we have the encapsulation of almost everything Van Halen is known for, all within the space of five minutes: Athletic drumming, an extended guitar introduction that transitions into a thick principal riff, vocals that are spoken more than sung, two interlocked solos, and lyrics that are technically sexist but somehow come across as nontoxic and complimentary. The video would outrage contemporary audiences, but you know, it mildly outraged people in 1984 too.

EVERYBODY WANTS SOME!! (1980)

Two exclamation points, just in case you didn't quite accept the veracity of Roth's nuanced socioeconomic argument. The improvised rap is lascivious and fetishistic, and the tribal drumming and monkey screeches might not translate in the modern landscape. That said, it's impossible to imagine their catalogue without this tune, in the same way it's impossible to imagine Rollie Fingers without a handlebar mustache.

POUNDCAKE (1991)

Van Halen (and especially Van Hagar) is now widely considered Dad Rock, a term that's insulting only if you hate children. "Poundcake" involves the use of a handheld electric drill, so this

is as Dad Rockin' as paternally possible. Eddie once said he just happened to pick up a drill in the studio and "by sheer luck, it was in the same key as the song." It must have been crazy to go through life constantly noticing the musical key of every power tool you stumble across, but such is the burden of genius.

JUMP (1984)

As an articulation of unadulterated joy and the unprecedented power of 11 rudimentary keyboard chords arranged in the best possible sequence, "Jump" is without flaw or peer. It's a song devoid of detractors, except for people who like Van Halen a little too much and refuse to view it as legitimate rock. The video (directed by Roth) is an instruction manual for how to look cool while acting ridiculous and defines everything beautiful about hair metal, though MTV made it so idiotically popular that it ultimately served as the first step toward the group imploding 12 months later.

FEEL YOUR LOVE TONIGHT (1978)

So palpably alive, it's like they're recording it right in front of you.

5150 (1986)

An obliquely romantic Hagar-era track that's playful and well-played—impellent, quasi-funky, and carried by an exceptional vocal performance (particularly on the chorus). There tends to be three distinct perceptions of who Sammy Hagar is. The first comes from people who worship Dave and can only see Sam as the guy who wrecked their favorite band. The second comes from snooty *Double Nickels on the Dime* fanatics who always viewed Hagar as the bozo to end all bozos and generally see his enlistment in Van Halen as an indictment of Eddie's taste and judgment. But the third perception is the casual perception, which is that Hagar is just a good dude—a rock star who doesn't act like a rock star, a self-aware interview subject, a laid-back workaholic, and the pop metal version of Jimmy Buffett.

ROMEO DELIGHT (1980)

The Rubicon for serious skullbangers (Slayer's Kerry King considers it "the last truly great Van Halen rock song"), "Romeo Delight" is Reagan-era Teeth Metal, which means metal for musicians who can't stop smiling about how much ass they're kicking. The onset 16 seconds are like getting punched in the face three times before realizing somebody else started a fistfight. It would have been fascinating if they'd maintained this musical direction for the next 10 years, although I probably wouldn't be writing this article if that had occurred.

RUNNIN' WITH THE DEVIL (1978)

If you subscribe to the multiverse theory of the cosmos, there exists somewhere a version of Earth where everything is identical to the Earth we now inhabit, except Eddie Van Halen, mercifully alive and well, only plays rhythm guitar. And within this alternate world, his only possible peer is Malcolm Young. EVH is certainly not the only guitarist who ever played lead and rhythm simultaneously, but almost no one else ever reaches this level of aptitude at both skills. The staccato bass playing on "Runnin' with the Devil" is similarly excellent, as is Roth's singing performance. There are clips all over the internet of Dave's isolated vocals, and I understand why people think all his decontextualized yowling is hilarious. But he's yowling on pitch, he has a bank vault of at least seven autonomous yowls, and yowls aren't supposed to be decontextualized.

PANAMA (1984)

The strongest pure riff in the catalog. Highly stylized lyrics in the modality of Chuck Berry ("Model citizen / Zero discipline") and an overall propulsion that idles over the verse before accelerating through the chorus. It remains unclear if "Panama" is the name of a car, the name of the girl driving the car, or the variety of ganja the girl driving the car happens to be smoking. The specifics are unnecessary, unless you're the type of person who likes to know the geologic origin of all the rocks that just buried you in the avalanche.

D.O.A. (1979)

A primordial antecedent to "Panama," this is Van Halen going straight for the jugular and solely focusing on tempo and texture, with lyrics about a crime they may or may not have committed. It seems like they could have made a horizontal song like this twice a year for half a century, but it's actually rather rare, which makes one wonder if what sounds like simplicity is actually complicated clarity.

UNCHAINED (1981)

The title reflects the band's lifestyle. The music reflects the power of their reality. Nonchalantly consumed from a distance, "Unchained" merely feels like insatiable straight-ahead rock, but the lick is freaky, obliquely hovering above the foundation while the drums oscillate between two unrelated performance philosophies. It's as heavy as music can be without being heavy at all. After the solo, Roth chats up studio producer Templeman about his suit and the acquisition of leg (singular), almost none of which makes any goddamn sense in any context that isn't this song.

DANCE THE NIGHT AWAY (1979)

The crowning achievement of Michael Anthony's John Cazale–like career as a background vocalist: There are dozens of little details here that could be fixated and expanded upon (the cowbell, the moment where Roth nearly laughs at his own caterwauling, the way the melody captures the specific atmosphere of a June evening 10 minutes before dusk, etc.). But the deeper truth is that this song just makes people feel good. You can't listen to "Dance the Night Away" without feeling good.



THE ORIGINAL LINEUP IN 1978: Eddie Van Halen, David Lee Roth, Alex Van Halen, and Michael Anthony.

This should be the hold music for suicide prevention hotlines.

ERUPTION (1978)

There are those who don't even consider this a song. It wasn't intended for the album, Eddie always insisted it includes a mistake, and there are now eighth graders on YouTube who can replicate every note. But "Eruption" is the distilled essence of Van Halen, the vortex of their ethos, and the sonic justification for jettisoning every lead singer who starts to seem halfway annoying. The first 45 seconds are impressive, but not transcendent (there are, in fact, certain similarities to the opening of the 1970 Cactus song "Let Me Swim"). The music fades out, and any cogent first-time listener would find themselves thinking, "Well, I guess that was it. I guess that was okay." But suddenly he's back, and now he's attacking the instrument the way piranhas skeletonize a water buffalo, and then he does that thing that he always does and your living room speakers transmogrify into the P-Funk Mothership and ascend through the roof and into the troposphere. It ends with the Doppler effect, except you haven't moved and neither has he. This is, by the widest possible margin, the most famous freestanding guitar solo of all time. And I realize if you hate Van Halen, this is precisely what you hate. You hate the sensation of having your brain inside a beehive, you hate the distance between the proficiency of the artist and the potentiality of his audience, and you hate that this guy just invented the 1980s. But if you love Van Halen, this is what you love, and you can listen to it a thousand times without diminishing returns. The experience does not evolve. You will always be inside that guitar. ●

Adapted from a ranking of all Van Halen songs that appeared on Vulture.com.



"EDDIE, FROM THE MOMENT I met him, was one of the sweetest people I'd ever met," Foreigner guitarist Mick Jones, who helped produce *5150* in 1986, told *Rolling Stone*. "No pretense or airs or anything or attitude. He was just a lovely guy . . . I was just mesmerized with working him."



REMEMBERING EDDIE

OVER THE YEARS, AND FOLLOWING HIS PASSING, FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND FELLOW ROCK STARS SHARED THEIR LOVE AND RESPECT FOR A ROCK 'N' ROLL ICON AND INNOVATOR



"He was the best father I could ever ask for. Every moment I've shared with him on and off stage was a gift. My heart is broken and I don't think I'll ever fully recover from this loss. I love you so much, Pop."

–Wolfgang Van Halen



"My husband, my love, my Peep, My heart and soul have been shattered into a million pieces. I never knew it was possible to cry so many tears or feel such incredible sadness. Our journey together has not always been an easy one but in the end and always we have a connection and love that will always be. Saying goodbye is the hardest thing I have ever had to do so instead I say so long, I will see you again soon in a place with no pain or sorrow. Please watch over [our dog] Kody and I. We love you and miss you so very much."

–Janie Liszewski

PHOTOGRAPH BY HARRY BENSON ©1992



"40 years ago my life changed forever when I met you. You gave me the one true light in my life, our son, Wolfgang. Through all your challenging treatments for lung cancer, you kept your gorgeous spirit and that impish grin. I'm so grateful Wolfie and I were able to hold you in your last moments. I will see you in our next life my love."

–Valerie Bertinelli



"Eddie was a guitar wonder, his playing pure wizardry. To the world of music he was a special gift. To those of us fortunate enough to have met him, a special person. He leaves a big hole in a lot of hearts. To the Van Halen family my heartfelt sympathies."

– Angus Young, AC/DC



"You changed our world. You were the Mozart of rock guitar."

– Nikki Sixx, Mötley Crüe



"I saw them as a new band that I'd never heard of. I was invited to go see them at a place called the Starwood in 1977 . . . I heard this astonishing sound, guitars, it just sounded like three or four guitar players all playing at the same time. What is that? And I went to the front and saw this guy tapping away on his guitar, which I'd never seen before . . . this one guitar was making all this sound and I never heard anything like that . . . I was just honored and lucky enough to be there to witness the greatness before it exploded on the world . . . I saw a more powerful than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings, I saw it; I didn't discover Superman, he was always there. I just happened to be there when they exploded on the scene."

–Gene Simmons, to Entertainment Tonight



"Eddie put the smile back in rock guitar at a time when it was all getting a bit broody. He also scared the hell out of a million guitarists because he was so damn good."

–Joe Satriani to Billboard *in 2015*



"He had profound things to say on the instrument. Guys tried to copy him, and none of them came close."

–Van Halen producer Ted Templeman, in his memoir, A Platinum Producer's Life in Music

"I remember one day walking into the studio and he had duct tape and fabric in between the keys of the piano and he would rip them out and it would make this ungodly sound. And he had guitars all over the floor. And I'm like, 'What are you doing?' And he was the eccentric genius here, trying to find what he heard in his head and trying to get it out . . . I was just witness to this genius who had chosen guitar as his tool."

–Gary Cherone, to Rolling Stone



"He's the sweetest, most humble, down-to-earth, normal guy. He has no attitude, and look at what this guy has done!"

–Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi, to Guitar World *in 2013*

EDDIE'S MUSIC WAS ALWAYS evolving. "What I have done over the last few records is focus more on songwriting than just be the gunslinger speed guitar freak," he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1991. "It's fun to solo as fast as you can and do all the crazy stuff. But as you mature, you realize you have to have the cake before you put a candle on it."





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"We built a career on misbehaving," Roth (with Eddie at Chicago's International Amphitheatre in 1981) told LIFE in 1982.

ROCK 'N' ROLLER SKATES

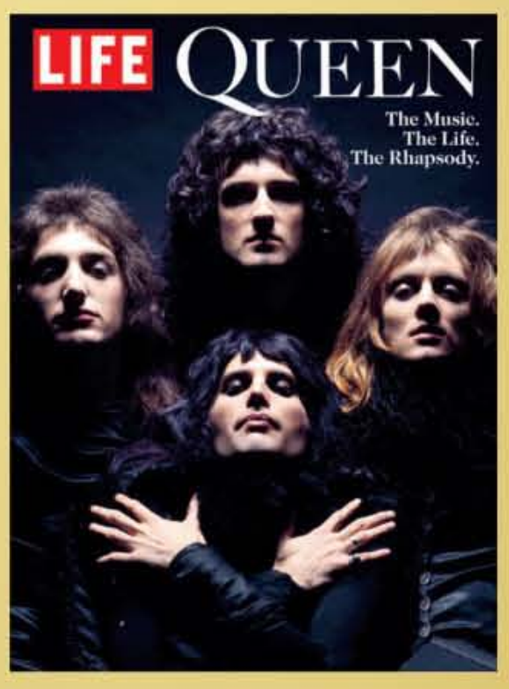


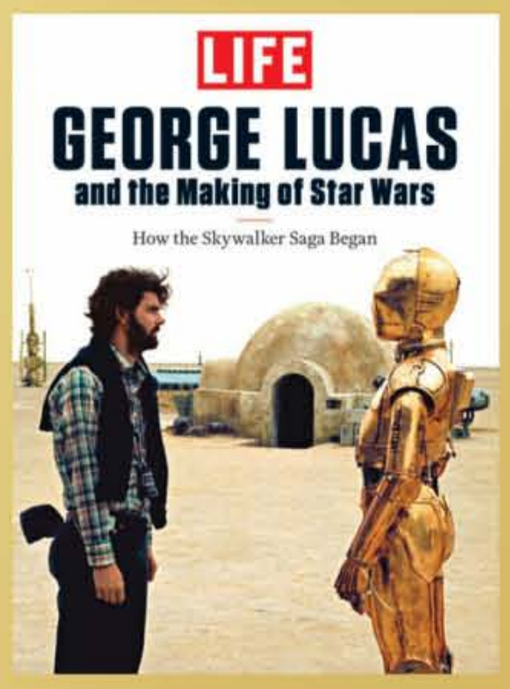
It was the music *and* the show. And in 1979, on the same seven-stop trip to Japan that Van Halen took this collegial spin through Osaka Castle Park, they ripped through a brash 18-song set—"Light Up the Sky" to "Atomic Punk"—to huge audiences that ate up just what they were dishing. "We know that people come to see bands that look and act special," David Lee Roth once said, "and that's why we dress in some outrageous costumes and put on a visual show, live right in front of your naked steaming eyeballs. We've got the tightest pants in the business."

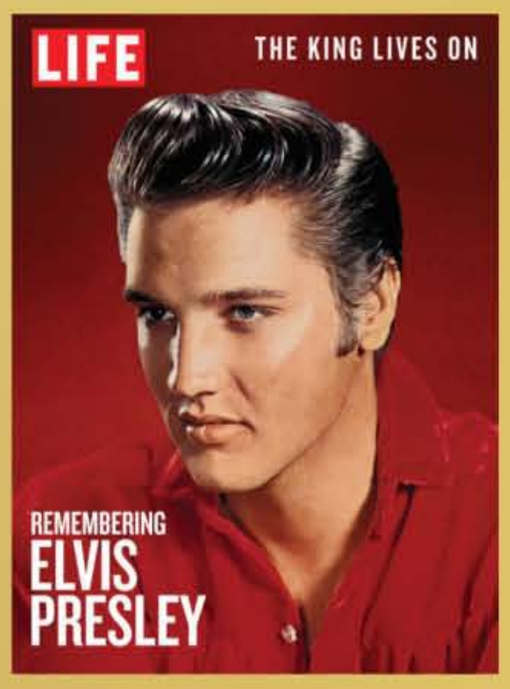
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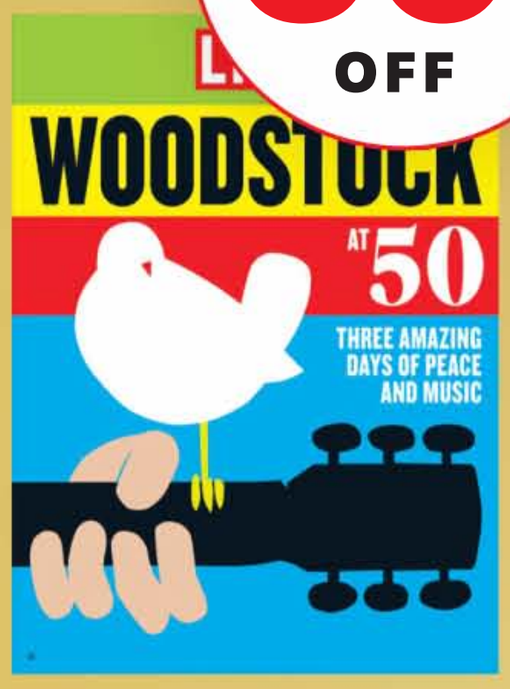
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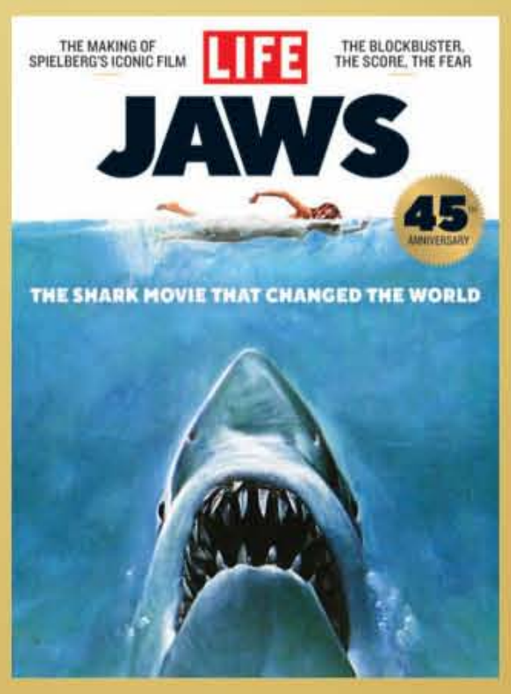
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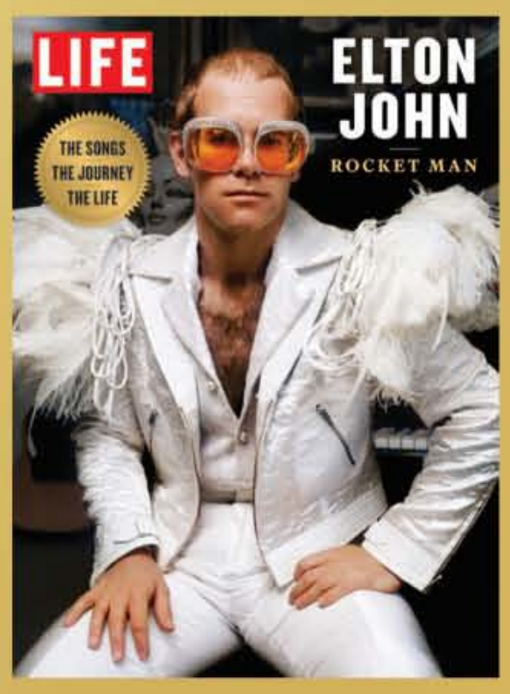


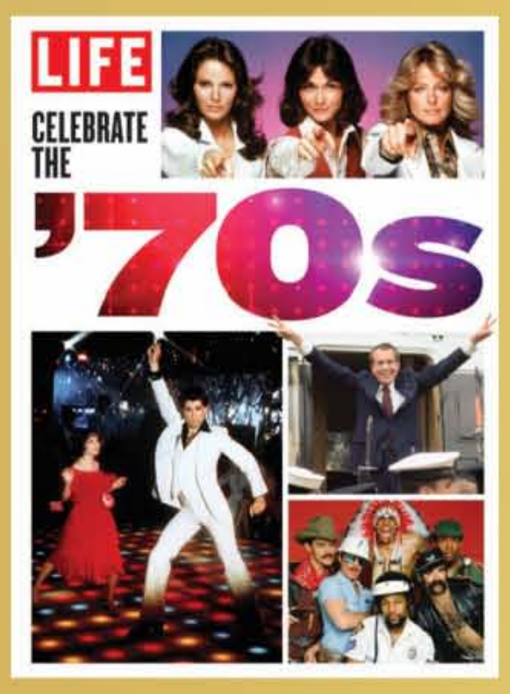


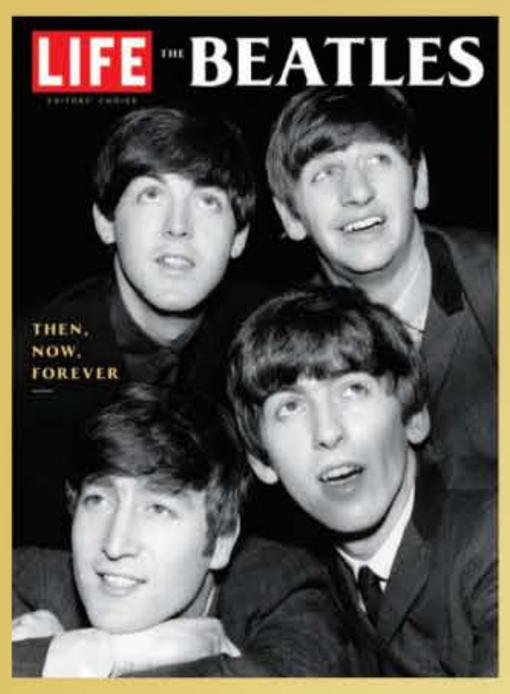




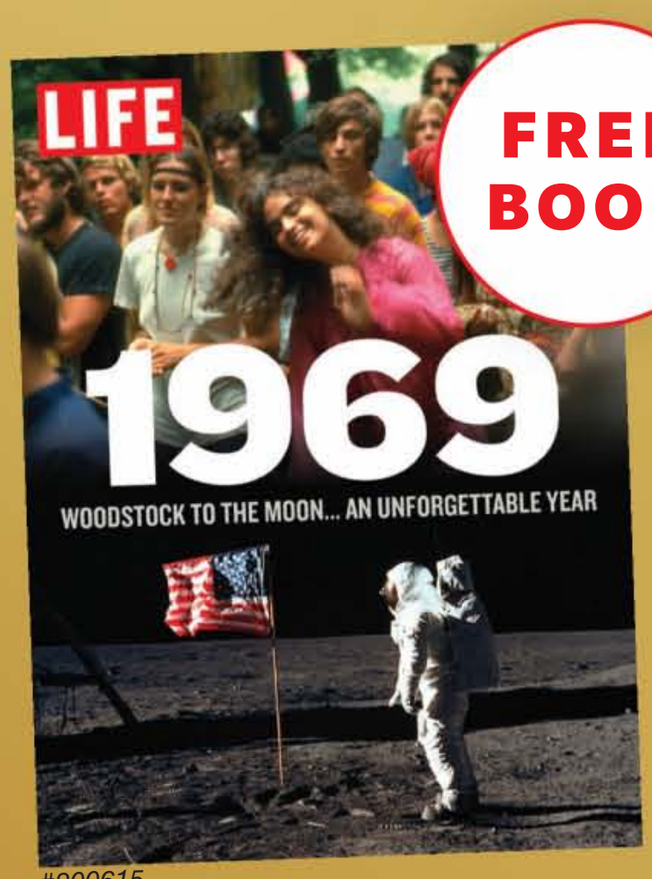








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“A GUITAR IS A VERY PERSONAL EXTENSION OF THE PERSON PLAYING IT. YOU HAVE TO BE EMOTIONALLY AND SPIRITUALLY CONNECTED TO YOUR INSTRUMENT.”

—EDDIE VAN HALEN